

The Character of ‘Passive Hero’ in the Narrative Structures of Korea’s Premodern Literature

Maurizio RIOTTO*

Faculty of Theology, Anyang University, Anyang City, Rep. of Korea

Received: May 4, 2022 • Accepted: February 27, 2023

Published Online: May 22, 2023

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the figure of the passive hero first in the Korean literature of origins, and then in classical Korean literature of the Koryŏ and Chosŏn periods. After a general introductory section, in which the worldwide literary archetype of the hero and its evolution over time are examined, the author, specifically examining Korean literature, analyzes in part one the passive heroes of four short historical/mythological stories variously set in an era between the second and eighth centuries, and then part two of the article analyzes three passive hero figures as protagonists of one 14th-century tale and two 18th-century classic novels. The author thus shows how the narrative of the passive hero has undergone a significant transformation in Korea, passing from a mythical/spiritual state (which often does not even admit the figure of an antagonist) to a decidedly secular, materialist and politicized condition where the protagonists find themselves facing cultural superstructures which, in addition to generating antagonists, push passive heroes towards true forms of defensive fundamentalism.

KEYWORDS

hero, passive hero, Korean Literature, Classic Korean Literature, Passive hero in Korean Literature

* Corresponding author. E-mail: lugalbanda@anyang.ac.kr

PROLOGUE: THE HERO AS LITERARY ARCHETYPE

When Joseph Campbell published his famous book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949, the thought and works of Freud and Jung were dominating the intellectual reality of the time and exerting a very heavy influence not only on psychoanalysts, but also on philosophers, anthropologists and historians of religion. Campbell was not exempt from this influence: on the contrary, drawing heavily on the thought of those two illustrious scientists, he devoted a lot of space to a psychoanalytic interpretation of myths, making substantially little distinction between the deeds of gods and of heroes.¹ In this way, the hero's deeds remain something majestic, his task something superhuman and of unfathomable solemnity.

Certainly, Campbell often shows a kind of complacency and an attraction for the exotic aspect of the myth, its landscapes, its places, its characters, and its cathartic role. But must the hero necessarily be condemned to 'return'? Aeneas is a hero who has escaped from Troy and will never return there.² And again: must the hero necessarily be a god or a demigod who descends to the Underworld, speaks to the dead, fights against monsters of all kinds and qualities, and performs amazing feats? And if not, then what is he/she?

The very etymology of the word 'hero' illuminates its original meaning. The term presumably derives from the ancient Greek *ἥρωϝς, which became ἥρως after the disappearance of the initial *vau* and the aspiration of the successive vowel. On its original meaning, the currently most followed hypothesis is that this term dates back to an Indo-European root *w/v-r-, which is the basis of words such as the Latin *vir* (man: hence the Latin *virtus* and the English *virtue*), the Sanskrit *vīra* (hero, man: *Mahāvīra* or 'great hero' is a frequent term in Indian religious narrative), the Gothic *vair*, and the Anglo-Saxon *wer*.

The figure of the hero is present throughout the world, although when it comes to antiquity, it is mainly known through Greek sources as a character related to the Hellenic world. Precisely from the ancient Greek narrative it is thus understood that the hero is a superhuman being, capable of extraordinary feats, who becomes the social and moral symbol of the group (city, tribe, etc.) from which he emerges. The very name Herakles (Ἡρακλῆς), the ancient hero *par excellence*, literally means 'Glory of Hera', but its resemblance to the term 'hero' cannot go unnoticed, and is perhaps not accidental.

In Homer there is no trace of hero cults, and the hero himself is distinguished above all by his sagacity and warrior prowess. Already in Hesiod, however, the hero is a character midway between the human and divine spheres: after all, many heroes are the offspring of a god or goddess and a mortal.³ The hero is thus a demigod (ἡμίθεος), a rather ambiguous term that can indicate both a mortal of exceptional abilities and a fallen deity, even if it is true that some of them

¹ Campbell 2004: 28. Campbell's concept of 'hero' can be summed up in the following sentence: 'The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: "separation-initiation-return", which might be named the nuclear unit of monomyth.'

² In his well-known book *Éloge de la fuite*, the French biologist/philosopher Henri Laborit shows how escape and renunciation, far from being something dishonorable, can instead be a source of salvation and wisdom, opening up new scenarios and new possibilities for fugitives, even enabling them to turn them into heroes. See Laborit 1976.

³ Having a god as a parent was the main prerogative of the demigods and dates back to the time when gods and men lived together, only to be later divided by Zeus.



have a monstrous appearance and few virtues.⁴ Indeed Hesiod, in his poem *Works and the Days*, considers the fourth age of mankind the Heroic Age.⁵

Heroes become objects of worship in the ensuing periods, but their number begins to expand to include not only the demigods of antiquity, but also the founders of cities, the heads of philosophical schools, the well-deserving of politics, and other illustrious characters. Gradually, the heroes become no longer unreachable like the gods, rather they are ever closer to the people. The heroes now no longer belong to myth, but to reality as they become the protagonists of stories, sagas and tales. The process of ‘humanization’ which has come about by the start of the Hellenistic period and the consequent philosophical reflection, combined with the depersonalization of the individual under the dominion of Rome,⁶ sees the birth of a new literary genre, the Greek and Latin novel, where the hero is now absolutely secular and not necessarily endowed with extraordinary attributes.⁷ The heroes are now ordinary men and women, voluntary or involuntary protagonists of more or less complicated stories. The advent of Christianity will then bring the new figure of the ‘saint’, the hero of religion who even goes so far as to sacrifice his own life in the name of faith. The hero has become modern and has acquired many more faces than the thousand attributed to him by Campbell: heroes, in fact, on the one hand acquire or regain their lost sacredness (in the case of the saints), while on the other hand they permanently free themselves from sacredness, becoming protagonists of satire, provocations, even scurrility when necessary.

The hero is therefore a literary archetype who in the classic epos embodied above all the demigod, but who over the centuries has passed to being someone who excels in civil and military value, or who becomes a witness to the faith, or who is fully committed to a philanthropic ideal such as science or liberty. But above all, and more simply, the hero becomes the protagonist of a story, true or fictitious, in which he or she takes on the most varied connotations given to him/her from one time to another by the writer/narrator. The hero is thus ‘filed’ and ‘classified’: there is the mystical hero, active and positive, without blemish and without fear (Roland, Galahad, El Cid), there is the avenger hero (Robin Hood, Song Jiang 宋江, Hong Kiltong 洪吉童, Zorro), there is the ‘dark’ hero (Medea, Macbeth, Mr. Hyde), there is the ‘titanic’ hero of the *Sturm und Drang* movement (Prometheus, Werther, Faust). There is also the anti-hero, who is the one who moves away from the stereotypes of the character in a burlesque and satirical key: Encolpius of the *Satyricon*, Lucius of *The Golden Ass*, Don Quixote, Lazarillo de Tormes, Chŏn Uch’i 田禹治 (or Chŏn Unch’i 全雲致), Yi Ch’unp’ung 李春風, Nasreddin,⁸ Hašek’s Good Soldier Švejk. A subgroup of such kinds of heroes could be the so-called ‘reluctant’ heroes (Morrell 2008: 62).

And, finally, there are the ‘passive’ heroes, who are not always easy to frame and define. The notion of ‘passive hero’, as other kinds of hero, is not a codified and absolute concept, but simply a heuristic tool to be deployed in research in the field of literary criticism. In fact, even the passive

⁴ Just think of Tityos (Τῑτύος), son of Zeus and Elara (Εἰάρα), or of Procrustes (Προκρούστης), son of Poseidon and an unknown woman.

⁵ Hesiod, *Erga*, vv. 156–160.

⁶ With the beginning of the Hellenistic era, when the new religious and philosophical currents favored the rise of cult associations, the veneration that until then had only been directed to public heroes began to be directed also to private heroes, as evidenced by numerous inscriptions. In Roman times, the word ‘hero’ became synonymous with the deceased, and any worthy citizen could obtain the honor of that title.

⁷ On secondary sources in English on the ancient Greek novel see, among others, Whitmarsh 2011. For the texts in English translation see Reardon (ed.) 1989.

⁸ Naşr al-din, or ‘Defender of the Faith’. He is a bizarre yet wise anti-hero of the Islamic tradition whose deeds are known from China to Spain. See Marzolph 2006, and Borrow (ed.) 1884.



hero may have various nuances: this is the case, for example, when Odysseus, a fundamentally passive hero in his forced wandering over the seas, becomes active when it comes to eliminating the suitors for Penelope's hand and claimants to the throne of Ithaca (Cook 1999: 151–155). Very simply speaking, I can say that passive heroes can often be identified as those characters who become protagonists involuntarily, as they are forced by fate or by men to carry out feats and actions that they had not budgeted for in the least.⁹ This is a very ancient type of hero: if we want, in fact, even Heracles can be considered a passive hero, since the twelve 'labours' will be assigned to him by King Eurystheus (Εὐρύσθευς). Subsequently, the stories of thwarted love in Hellenistic novels will feature various passive heroes: characters such as Cherea and Calliroe, or Daphnis and Chloe, need no special introduction. Developed as popular literature after a certain interest in exoticism followed the conquests of Alexander the Great, these novels have a plot that usually involves pairs of lovers separated by the will of Fate or the gods, who will have to reunite after a series of more or less perilous adventures. One must pay careful attention from time to time to the circumstances that generate passive heroes, because such circumstances will be very important in the Korean stories analyzed in this article. In more recent times, among many 'passive heroes' may be considered Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Renzo and Lucia in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, and Camus's *L'Étranger*.

And what about Korea? Certainly, Korean literature is no exception and has its passive heroes. Indeed, it is not too hazardous to say that one such 'passive hero' is perhaps the most famous character in classical Korean literature, namely Ch'unhyang 春香. Now I will analyze four episodes of Korean literature from the earliest period, and then three classic novels/short stories from a more recent period. The four examples of the oldest stories presented here and translated by the author of this article are not chosen at random, but rather because they are among the most representative examples of ancient Korean fiction. Recorded numerous times in the most famous medieval and modern historical-mythological texts, they form part of the collective memory of the Korean people, originating in the most ancient era of Korean history, the 1st millennium AD, whose literature has been almost totally lost. Equally famous and representative are the three stories from more recent periods.

By the end we will see how the formative cause of the passive hero has undergone some mutations over the centuries, through a process of secularization not very dissimilar to that which occurred in the literatures of other countries, including western ones.¹⁰ In this regard, the investigation, far from dealing with literary criticism regarding style, characters, and genres, will be focused on narrative structures, following a structuralist approach of the Proppian type within the wide world of Structuralism and Jungian structural archetypes.¹¹ In more recent times, Jung's

⁹ The passive hero can become such even following an existential crisis which leads him to lose confidence in his role and values and to give up playing an active role, simply abandoning himself to the flow of events.

¹⁰ More generally, I find similarities in the process of birth and development of classical fiction between the East and the West. Starting from the biographies, we continue through the various stories and folk tales before arriving at the actual novel. In the West, however, an illustrious predecessor of the novel (and a fundamental stage of its formation) is the ancient theater (especially comedy) whose scripts will later be developed for literary purposes.

¹¹ Propp 1968. Jung's psychoanalytic theories actually are a pre-Structuralism, in the sense that he believes that the personal unconscious already contains 'a priori structures', which are part of the collective unconscious (see *infra*). Indeed, he holds that man as a person is nothing but the social mask of the structural archetype of the unconscious (Jung 1991: 50 ff.). Similar archetypes emerge in mythological tales and in travel stories, according to Jungian scholars such as Marie-Louise von Franz, and Joseph Campbell himself. See in this regard the works by von Franz (2002) and more generally, the works of Rak (2005) and Faranda (2009).



intuition of psychological ‘archetype’ has been deepened and developed by James Hillman (1975, 1979), who has valorized the concept of the ‘collective unconscious’ (different from the Freudian ‘personal unconscious’), the structures of which are shared among all humans. Jung’s ‘archetypal images’ are, in fact, inner representations of certain atavistic pre-structures, defined as ‘archetypes’, which the ego builds starting from the encounter with external reality (Jung 1977, Vegetti Finzi 2008). The archetypes are present with the same symbology in the unconscious of every human being, whatever their culture of origin; they are therefore transcultural and are functions of that part of the unconscious that Jung defines as the ‘collective unconscious’ which is common to the human species. Jung’s notion of psychological archetypes corresponds to what structuralist philosophers call mankind’s ‘reptile brain’ or ‘deep brain structure’, meaning that they can be found in human nature even predating culture (Laborit 1971). For this reason, these archetypes exist in every part of the world. On top of this innate motif, the cultural stratifications of each individual civilization add a series of different aspects and nuances to the form, the practice, and the purpose of the various phenomena. By overcoming the scientific limits of pure phenomenology, which often stops at mere observation of the similarities between phenomena, Structuralism aims to demonstrate that, when faced with the same situation, all human beings tend to react in the same way (the ‘nature’ of the reptilian brain), but in different aesthetic forms (the ‘culture’ of the structured brain) according to the various cultural contexts.¹²

PART ONE: THE ANCIENT PERIOD (1ST MILLENNIUM AD)

Episode 1: The Saga of Ondal 溫達 (From *Samguk sagi* 三國史記, book 45)

Although today it has mainly become a children’s fairy tale under the title of *Pabo Ondal iyagi* 파보 온달 이야기 (The Story of Ondal the Fool), this tale is actually very old. Recorded in book 45 of the *Samguk sagi* (Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms), a work in 50 books written in Chinese by Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1075–1151) and completed in 1145, Ondal’s Saga is an illuminating document on cultural models of ancient Korea, completely different from the better-known ones of Confucian Korea from the last six hundred years. The mythicized story¹³ of General Ondal of Koguryō 高句麗, which ends with his death in 590, actually has his wife as a co-protagonist/aide, in a social context that had to grant a high degree of autonomy and authority to women. Indeed, the princess wife of Ondal rebels against paternal authority and has the right to own private assets; moreover, she herself chooses her husband, whose destiny she actually forges. The princess is an expert on horses and is also a shamaness, as the final scene shows,¹⁴ in a social context where princes and shamans shared the same role of intermediary between Heaven and Earth. This role of queen/princess-shamaness is not unique in ancient Korean literature: Queen Sōndōk 善德 of

¹² In this regard, Lévi-Strauss (1949) 2002 is a pioneering work.

¹³ Sometimes considered a literary invention by Kim Pusik, the character of Ondal may instead have really existed and perhaps he was already recorded in much older works than *Samguk sagi*, like that *Hansangi* 漢山記 (Chronicles of Hansan) by Kim Taemun 金大問 (7th–8th centuries), today lost. In this regard see Yi Tohak 2017.

¹⁴ The princess in fact speaks to the spirit of Ondal, inducing him to return, albeit dead, to the capital.



Silla 新羅 is a seer¹⁵ and she herself orders to write a spell against her ‘fan’ Chigwi 地鬼 (or 志鬼) who had become a god of fire.¹⁶

On the sidelines of the history of Ondal, one can also guess the presence of endogamy (at least in the Royal House) in Koguryō (in fact the king would like to have given the princess in marriage to a nobleman of the Ko family, that is, the royal family itself), in total contrast to Confucian Korea, which is rigidly exogamous to the point of condemning marriages between spouses with the same surname (Riotto 1996). But here is the story that interests us, summarized for reasons of space:

溫達 高句麗平岡王時人也 容貌龍鐘可笑 中心則睦然 家甚貧 常乞食以養母 破衫弊履 往來於市井間 時人目之爲愚溫達 平岡王少女兒好啼 王戲曰 汝常啼我耳 長必不得爲士大夫妻 當歸之愚溫達 王每言之及女年二八 欲下嫁於上部高氏公主對曰 大王常語 汝必爲溫達之婦 今何故改前言乎 匹夫猶不欲食言 況至尊乎 故曰 王者無戲言 今大王之命 謬矣 妾不敢祇承...

Ondal lived in the kingdom of Koguryō, in the time of King P'yōnggang.¹⁷ His countenance was lopsided and ridiculous, but his soul was really good. Extremely poor, it was only thanks to the offerings of food made to him that he was able to support himself and his mother. Wearing tattered clothes and broken shoes, he wandered from market to market, and people at that time called him 'Ondal the fool'. Meanwhile, King P'yōnggang had a little daughter who cried constantly, to the point that the august parent, to try to silence her, repeated the same sentence: 'If you continue to whimper like this, deafening my ears, when you are grown up, I will have you married to a miserable person like Ondal the fool, instead of to a high official!'

And the princess grew up, till she reached the age of sixteen. Then, the king decided to marry her to a young nobleman of the Ko family, but the princess opposed her father's decision with these words: 'For a long time Your Majesty said that I would become the bride of a wretch like Ondal the fool. Why has Your Majesty changed your mind now? Even a man of the lowest standing tries not to tell lies, but Your Majesty, who is the king, can behave in this way? A king must not indulge in such jokes. Your Majesty is wrong, and I have a duty not to follow you in your error...'

The king then goes on a rampage and threatens to kick his daughter out of the palace if she does not follow his will. However, the princess does not back down from her decision and she voluntarily leaves the palace taking various jewels and gold ornaments with her. She then goes to visit Ondal and her mother, to whom she declares her intentions. At first, Ondal and the mother hesitate, fearing a deception, but in the end they accept. So the princess marries Ondal and...

...可共乎 乃賣金釧 買得田宅奴婢牛馬器物 資用完具 初 買馬 公主語溫達曰 慎勿買市人馬 須擇國馬病瘦而見放者 而後換之 溫達如其言 公主養飼甚勤 馬日肥且壯 高句麗常以春三月三日 會獵樂浪之丘 以所獲猪鹿 祭天及山川神 至其日 王出獵 群臣

¹⁵ See *Suijōn in Samguksa chōr'yo*, book 8, *Suijōn in Haedong chamnok*, book 1 and *Samguk yusa* book 1.

¹⁶ *Suijōn in Taep'yōng tōngjae*, book 73, *Suijōn in Taedong unbugunok*, book 20, *Suijōn in Haedong chamnok*, book 4. On this occasion, the Queen also shows her alchemical power as Chigwi from an Earth spirit (地鬼) is transformed into a spirit of fire (火鬼). On this episode see Ōm Kiyōng 2007 and Riotto 2014.

¹⁷ Also called P'yōngwōn 平原. He reigned from 559 to 590.



及五部兵士皆從 於是 溫達以所養之馬隨行 其馳騁 常在前 所獲亦多 他無若者 王召來問姓名 驚且異之 時 後周武帝出師伐遼東 王領軍逆戰於拜山之野 溫達為先鋒 疾鬪斬數十餘級 諸軍乘勝奮擊大克 及論功 無不以溫達為第一 王嘉歎之曰 是吾女婿也 備禮迎之 賜爵為大兄 由此 寵榮尤渥 威權日盛 及陽岡王[陽岡王 當作嬰陽王]即位 溫達奏曰 惟新羅 割我漢北之地 為郡縣 百姓痛恨 未嘗忘父母之國 願大王不以愚不肖 授之以兵 一往必還吾地 王許焉 臨行誓曰 鷄立峴竹嶺已西 不歸於我 則不返也 遂行 與羅軍戰於阿旦城之下 為流矢所中 路而死 欲葬 柩不肯動 公主來撫棺曰 死生決矣 於乎 歸矣 遂舉而窆 大王聞之悲慟. (Samguk sagi, book 45)

...After selling the gold bracelets she had brought with her, the princess bought some land, a new house, slaves, cows, horses and all sorts of provisions and tools. Later, when Ondal had to buy a horse for himself, she said to him: 'Don't buy a horse like the ones in the market. Rather, choose an indigenous horse, even if it is sick and emaciated'. Ondal obeyed and, thanks to the princess's care, the horse soon became healthy and well fed.

In spring, on the third day of the third month, it was customary in the kingdom of Koguryō for the people to gather on a hill near Nangnang and organize a hunt where deer and wild boar were hunted, and then a sacrifice was celebrated in honor of Heaven and of the river and mountain gods. That day the king went hunting followed by various dignitaries and soldiers of five districts. The event was also attended by Ondal who, riding the horse he had raised, was always ahead of everyone, hunting down so many beasts that no one else could match him. Eventually the king called him, and when he heard his name he was surprised and amazed.

Shortly thereafter, Emperor Wu of the later Zhou,¹⁸ gathered an army and attacked the Liaodong.¹⁹ The king of Koguryō then sent an army to counter the enemy and a clash took place in the plain of Baishan.²⁰ On this occasion Ondal, always in the front line, fought fiercely, killing several dozen of the enemy, thus giving his fellow soldiers the opportunity to launch a decisive attack and annihilate their opponents. At that point, whenever people argued about merit there was no one who did not consider Ondal the best, and even the king now praised him highly, saying proudly, 'This is my son-in-law', and lavished his favors upon him by elevating him to the rank of taehyōng²¹. From this moment on, the king's favor increased, and Ondal's dignity and authority grew day by day.

When King P'yōnggang died and Yōngyang²² succeeded him, Ondal reported to the new ruler: 'Silla has stolen from us several territories north of the Han River and made them its counties and prefectures. Our compatriots who live in that area are suffering severely, since they had never before experienced losing the lands of their fathers. Please your Majesty not to consider me either unworthy or foolish and entrust me with the command of an army in order to recover what belongs to us'.

¹⁸ Emperor Wu 武 reigned from 561 to 578. The Later Zhou 後周 here quoted is better known as Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581): the citation in the text could therefore be an error by the author.

¹⁹ Sino-Korean: Yodong.

²⁰ Sino-Korean: Paesan.

²¹ The degrees of the Koguryō administration vary according to the sources. For this reason, the degree named taehyōng 大兄 is sometimes considered to be the third or the seventh on a scale of thirteen, or the sixth on a scale of eleven or twelve.

²² Also called P'yōngyang 平陽, he reigned from 590 to 618. The original text incorrectly has Yanggang 陽岡.



The king agreed, and Ondal left, taking the following oath: ‘I will not return until I have returned to our authority all the territories west of Kyeriphyŏn²³ and Chungnyŏng²⁴.

The clash with Silla’s forces took place under the walls of Adan,²⁵ but during the battle Ondal was shot dead by a stray arrow. When it came to celebrating his funeral, no one was able to move the coffin that contained his body. Then came the princess who, caressing the coffin, said: ‘Life and death, everything is done. Come on, now it is time to go back’. Thus, finally, Ondal’s corpse could go back and be buried. At the news the sovereign felt great pain.

Episode 2: Yŏng’o 迎烏 and Seo 延烏 (From Suijŏn 殊異傳 in P’ilwŏn chapki 筆苑雜記, book 2)

This episode is found in a fragment of the *Suijŏn*²⁶ recorded in *P’ilwŏn chapki*, book 2, but also in book 1 of the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事,²⁷ where Yŏng’o is called Yŏn’o 延烏. The name ‘Yŏng’o’ is preferable and, probably closer to the original one: in fact the character 烏, ‘crow’, can be associated with the sun (think only of *samjogo* 三足烏), Yŏng’o becomes synonymous with Yŏng’il 迎日 which is also the name of the place of sacrifice to the sun and the moon mentioned at the end of the story.²⁸

The story is highly symbolic, and most likely alludes to a migration of people and cultural models from the Korean peninsula to the Japanese islands, in the context of a phenomenon well documented by archaeology, which was to be repeated several times in the protohistoric period between the end of the 1st millennium BC and the beginnings of the Common Era.²⁹ Yŏng’o and Seo, therefore, are probably two of the many *Umi-o watatte kita hito* 海を渡って来た人 (The people who came by crossing the sea)³⁰ in search of new opportunities, or forced by political events that occurred in the Korean peninsula of which we still know very little.³¹ Here is the tale anyway:

²³ A pass northeast of Choryŏng 鳥嶺 (Kyŏngsangbukto 慶尙北道), no longer used today. Also called Kyerim-nyŏng 鷄立嶺.

²⁴ A pass that connected the current provinces of Kyŏngsangbukto and Ch’ungch’ŏngbukto 忠清北道.

²⁵ On Mount Ach’a 峩嵯, today belonging to the city of Seoul, Kwangjangdong 廣壯洞, Kwangjingu 廣津區.

²⁶ ‘Unusual stories’. Also called *Silla Suijŏn* 新羅殊異傳, it is collection of fantastic tales. Probably written between the 9th and the 11th centuries, it survives only in some fragments recorded in later works. The only western monograph with translation of this work is that by Riotto 2014.

²⁷ *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (of Korea). Probably written in five books by the Buddhist master Iryŏn 一然 (1206–1289), it was completed around 1280. It is a collection that includes historical facts, myths, anecdotes and Buddhist miracles.

²⁸ According to Kim Kangsan (2011), the tale implies the (forced?) migration to Japan of sun-worshipping people who would have transplanted the solar cult in Japan. In this way, Japan would have become ‘The rising sun country’. On the rituals linked to sun and moon in Silla see Kim Yŏngjun 2019.

²⁹ Chŏn Suyŏn (2018), sees, at the basis of Yŏng’o and Seo’s migration, political and economic reasons. In particular, the population of what is today the P’ohang 浦項 area (Togi 都祈) would have fled to Japan under the pressure of Silla. The migrants would have brought with them the techniques of silk production, and for this they would have been welcomed with great favor by the Japanese. The term ‘Togi’, however, is not recorded in *Suijŏn*.

³⁰ The arrival in Japan of a prince from Silla (called Chŏnilchimo 天日之矛 or Chŏnji ilmo 天之日矛) is also attested in Japanese sources (*Kojiki*, book 2 and *Nihon shōki*, book 6). On the question see, among others, Palmer (ed.) 2016: 157, note 419.

³¹ In any case, the migratory movement from the Korean peninsula to the Japanese islands must have been impressive if, already in the full historical epoch, in the *Shinsen shōjiroku* 新撰姓氏錄 (New Selection and Record of Hereditary Titles and Family Names), a Japanese work completed in the year 815, among the 326 certainly foreign families surveyed as many as 163 were of Korean origin. See Tanaka 1996.



東海濱有人夫日迎烏 妻日細烏 一日迎烏採藻海濱 忽漂至日本國小島爲主細烏尋其夫 又漂至其國立爲妃 是時新羅日月無光 日者秦日 迎烏細烏日月之精 今去日本故有斯怪 王遣使求二人迎烏日 我到此 天也乃以細烏所織絹 付送使者日 以此祭天可矣 遂名祭天所日迎日仍置縣 是新羅阿達王四年也. (*Suijōn* in *P'ilwōn chapki*, book 2)

Two spouses lived on the coast of the Eastern Sea: the husband was called Yōng'ò 迎烏, his wife Seo 細烏. One day Yōng'ò, while he was intent on collecting seaweed, was suddenly pushed by the waves towards a small island in Japan of which he became the king. Seo, while looking for her husband, was in turn pushed by the waves towards that same island and there, once reunited with her husband, she became queen.

In that same period, the sun and moon lost their light in Silla. A soothsayer then spoke to the sovereign as follows: 'Yōng'ò and Seo are respectively the spirits of the sun and the moon.

Now they are in Japan, and it is for this reason that this disastrous phenomenon occurred'.

The king then sent a messenger to call the couple back, but Yōng'ò said: 'If I am here, it is by the will of Heaven'. Seo, on the other hand, gave the messenger a piece of silk that she had woven herself and told him: 'If you offer this silk to Heaven in a special ceremony, everything in Silla will be as before'.

The messenger returned to Silla with the silk and reported to the king what he had learned. A sacrifice to Heaven was then celebrated, with the offering of the silk, and the sun and moon began to shine again. The place of sacrifice was then called 'Yōng'il 迎日', and a county was also created there.

These events took place during the fourth year of the reign of Adal 阿達,³² king of Silla.

Episode 3: Kim Hyōn 金現 and the tigress (From *Samguk yusa*, book 5)

This story is found in book 5 of the *Samguk yusa*, but also in a fragment (much shorter) of the *Suijōn* recorded in *Taedong unbugunok*, book 15, and in *Haedong chamnok*, book 4. Technically it is very similar to Ondal's saga: a supernatural female being creates her own male hero, projecting onto him, in a real 'transfer', those virtues that the society of the time did not allow her to express. In both stories the ending is tragic and the catharsis is negative: the ideal recreation of the balance between *yin* and *yang*, after having been adventurously and laboriously achieved, is broken, and fails due to the disappearance of the masculine element in the case of Ondal, of the feminine element in the case of Kim Hyōn.³³ The negative ending is a consequence of the order following the primordial chaos where all male and female energies, human and feral, were locked up in a 'cosmic egg': the post-chaos society is a society of 'reason' that rebels against an attempt at rejection in a past in which there were no reference points or social rules. This aspect will become decisive, in later literature, for the appearance of the 'antagonist' in the plots of stories. The antagonist, in

³² That means 157 AD.

³³ In the episode of Kim Hyōn, however, we glimpse in the tigress a sort of redemption from her karma, the search for martyrdom as an atonement for her previous condition. Not surprisingly, falling in love takes place at the foot of a pagoda and it is no coincidence that the tiger-girl will be remembered with the erection of a temple to her memory: we are, moreover, in the sphere of Buddhism, and interpretation in the didactic-edifying sense of the episode must certainly be taken into serious consideration. The close relationship between love and death in *Suijōn* was rightly noted by Yi Hakchu 2000.



fact, arises from the distinction made between ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ in the civilizations of ‘reason’. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the love between Kim Hyŏn and the tigress is impossible because the two lovers belong to worlds that are separated ‘conceptually’ even before ‘naturally’.³⁴ In other words, it is the ‘culture’ (understood as awareness of the human dimension) which claims its own ‘value’ and ‘right’. Here is the abbreviated text of the story:

新羅俗 每當仲春 初八至十五日 都人士女 競遶興輪寺之殿塔爲福會 元聖王代 有郎君金現者 夜深獨遶不息 有一處女 念佛隨遶 相感而目送之 遶畢 引入屏處通焉...

It was the custom in Silla that every year, from the eighth to the fifteenth day of the second month, men and women competed in invoking luck by walking around the pagoda of the Hŭngnyun temple,³⁵ in an event that was therefore called pokhoe 福會.³⁶ At the time of King Wŏnsŏng³⁷ a young man called Kim Hyŏn, at night and alone, had been performing this rite without cease for quite a while when he realized he was being followed by a girl who was reciting Buddhist prayers. Their gazes met and their hearts were inflamed: they abandoned the tour around the pagoda and, after going to an isolated place, exchanged there their love....

In the end, however, the girl turns out to be a tigress who, in order to save one of her evil brothers from divine wrath, chooses to die in his place, so she tells her beloved these words:

...三兄之惡 天旣厭之 一家之殃 予欲當之 與其死 於等閑人之手 曷若伏於郎君刃下 以報之德乎 妾以明日入市爲害劇則國人無如我何 大王必募以重爵而捉我矣 君其無怯 追我乎城北林中 吾將待之 現曰 人交人 彝倫之道 異類而交 蓋非常也 旣得從容 固多天幸 何可忍賣於伉儷之死 僥倖一世之爵祿乎 女曰 郎君無有此言 今妾之壽夭 蓋天命也 亦吾願也 郎君之慶也 予族之福也 國人之喜也 一死而五利備 其可違乎 但爲妾創寺 講真詮 資勝報 則郎君之惠莫大焉...

‘The evil actions of my three brothers have provoked the indignation of heaven and I alone have decided to pay for the misfortunes of our house. I would therefore like to perish with a stroke of your sword rather than at the hands of others: thus, I would give you thanks for your love. Tomorrow I will come to the streets of the capital city market and walk around there sowing panic among the people. Nobody will dare to attack me and the king will surely put a price on my head, rewarding with a high institutional post the one who has been able to

³⁴ It is no coincidence that Far Eastern fantastic literature, whether Buddhist-inspired or not, focuses a lot on the relationship between the human dimension and other dimensions, such as those of the afterlife (spirits) and hybrid species. These are always descriptions in which the totalizing unconscious of the human being collides with a reality that has already defined and established the boundaries and the range of action of man himself. However, even the typically Confucian concept of the ‘assigned function’ (*myōngbun* 名分), can presage negative consequences in the event of a violation: in this way the social disparity canceled in the Ondal episode is also part of the violated ‘social rules’ that justify the negative ending.

³⁵ It is certainly a rite that is linked to the *pradakṣina*, the circumambulation rite traceable in various Indian religions. The Hŭngnyun temple in Kyŏngju 慶州 was inaugurated in 544, shortly after Buddhism was officially adopted in Silla. Destroyed for the first time during an insurrection, it was rebuilt in 921. It disappeared in the Chosŏn period, when it was again destroyed by fire. The pavilions visible today are contemporary reconstructions.

³⁶ That means ‘Assembly of good luck’.

³⁷ He reigned from 785 to 798.



neutralize me. You will not have to be afraid and you will have to search for me by going to the forest north of the city. I'll be there waiting for you'.

Kim Hyŏn replied: 'Relationships between humans are natural, but relations between different species are not. And yet, what has happened between us I consider a blessing from Heaven: how could I, then, trade my bride for a government post?'

'Don't say this, please. As a matter of fact, my premature death is an order from Heaven, and it is also my wish. Not only that, but it is also an opportunity for you, a fortune for my family, and a great happiness for the citizens. Dying only once would achieve five good deeds – how could I be sorry for that? Only, I ask you to erect a temple for me where you can help my soul through the holy scriptures, thereby obtaining spiritual retribution. There could be no other greater merit for you...'

Kim Hyŏn accepts, and when the next day he goes to the forest, the girl snatches the sword from his hands and kills herself. After that:

現既登庸 創寺於西川邊 號虎願寺 常講梵網經 以導虎之冥遊 亦報其殺身成己之恩 現臨卒 深感前事之異 乃筆成傳 俗始聞知 因名論虎林 稱于今. (*Samguk yusa*, book 5)

Having obtained the post, Kim Hyŏn had the Howŏn 虎願³⁸ temple built near the western stream, where he prayed for the repose of the tigress's soul by reciting the Brahmā's net Sūtra,³⁹ thus repaying the favor of the one who had sacrificed herself for his success. Shortly before his death, Kim Hyŏn wrote down his extraordinary and moving love story, so that everyone could learn about it. People named the work The Tigress's Forest,⁴⁰ and still now it is known by this title.

Episode 4: The Story of Kyŏnggang 景康, ancestor of Koryŏ 高麗

(From *Chewang'un'gi* 帝王韻紀, book 2)

Kyŏnggang (or Chakchegŏn 作帝建), son of the Tang Emperor Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–762), is the ancestor of T'aejo 太祖 of Koryŏ and in the *Chewang'un'gi*,⁴¹ book 2, is the protagonist of an episode that consolidates his birth rights. In the *Samguk yusa*, book 2, an almost identical episode is that of Kōt'aji 居陶知, a skilled archer and bodyguard of Yangp'ae 良貝, the younger son of Queen Chinsŏng 眞聖 (r. 887–897), who is traveling by sea to China as a diplomat.⁴² Arriving on

³⁸ That is to say, 'Hope of a tigress'.

³⁹ *Pōmmanggyōng* 梵網經 (Chinese: *Fanwang jing*) in the original text. This same title, however, is shared by two works: the *Brahmajāla sūtra*, in Sanskrit, and the *Brahmajāla sutta*, in Pāli. There are conflicting opinions on which is the one cited here, although, the first being a typically Mahāyāna text and the second a Theravāda text, perhaps it is better to give preference to the work in Sanskrit.

⁴⁰ The original sentence is '因名論虎林', which has led some translators to think that 論虎 has become the name of the forest. I prefer to think, also for consistency with the previous sentences, that 論 refers to the work written by Kim Hyŏn.

⁴¹ *Versified register of King and Emperors*. Written in two volumes by Yi Sūnghyu 李承休 (1224–1300), it was completed in 1287. The first book deals with the story of the Chinese dynasties, the second with Korean dynasties.

⁴² A comparative study of the two tales is found in Yŏ Sŏnggu 2016, but, in any case, it is very likely that the story of Kyŏnggang derives directly from that of Kōt'aji, as claimed by Chŏng Yŏnsik 2012.



the island of Kok 鵠, the delegation is unable to leave due to adverse weather conditions, and so a sacrifice is celebrated, together with a request for a response. The answer comes that in order to calm the bad weather, the ship must depart after first leaving a man on the island, at which time the escort-archers cast lots and the task falls to Kōt'aji. The ship sails again and the archer is left alone, and then an old man emerges from a pond and explains to him that shortly before, a strange monk who recited magic formulas had killed his children. The poor man had been left alone with his wife and only daughter, but since the monk had promised to return the next day, he pleads with Kōt'aji to neutralize the monstrous creature with arrows. The archer accepts and so, when the monk returns at dawn, he shoots an arrow that kills him instantly. After being killed, the monk actually turns out to be a quick-change fox. At that point the elder, who is actually the dragon-king of the sea, transforms his daughter into a flower and grants it to Kōt'aji, and then orders a pair of dragons to take him to the ambassador's ship so that he can complete the mission. The Tang emperor, seeing Kōt'aji escorted by dragons, plies him with gifts. Eventually, once Kōt'aji returns home, the flower becomes the splendid daughter of the dragon-king again and the two spouses live happily ever after.

In the *Chewang un'gi* version, on the other hand, it is Kyōnggang who gets stuck on an island during his trip to China for the purpose of seeing his father-emperor again. Then the dragon-king appears and here is what he says to Kyōnggang:

爰有老野狐
時時忽來此。
詐現佛威儀。
妖經紛說似。
我卽發頭痛。
此患難堪矣。
願子彈神弓。
爲我而除彼。
果如其所云。
斃之以一矢。
龍王復出謝。
引入深宮裏。
遂妻以長女。(Chewang un'gi, book 2)

*'An old and evil fox
From a long time is tormenting me,
By suddenly appearing and vanishing,
Pretending to be a Holy Buddha
At its whim, and blaspheming the Scriptures,
Annoys me with absurd speeches.
Now I am tired and worried
Nor can I still endure beyond:
I therefore beg you to hurl
A divine arrow at that plague'.
He did indeed what he had been told,
And with a dart killed the fox,*



*Then the dragon reappeared to thank him
And took him with him to his palace
Where he gave him eldest daughter⁴³ as wife.*

While the episode narrated by Iryön 一然 appears detached from any political context, the story narrated by Yi Sünghyu 李承休 is connected to the foundation of the kingdom of Koryŏ seen as a second Koguryŏ: the ability of Kyŏnggang as an archer, in fact, can only recall the archery skill of Chumong 朱蒙, the founder of Koguryŏ, and Kyŏnggang himself thus becomes a ‘reloaded’ Chumong. In addition, Yi Sünghyu separates Koryŏ’s fate from that of China, as it seems Kyŏnggang’s visit to China does not take place. The daughter of the dragon king, a divine being, will even be the queen Kyŏnghŏn 景獻 progenitor of the rulers of Koryŏ, to whom she will bequeath the exceptional status of ‘divine heirs’.⁴⁴

Apart from his involuntary political role, however, Kyŏnggang, like Kŏt’aji, remains a passive hero, who has become the protagonist following a fortuitous event or, if you like, a decree from Heaven.

PART TWO: SOME ASPECTS OF PASSIVE HERO’S EVOLUTION IN KOREAN CLASSIC LITERATURE (11TH–19TH CENTURIES): BETWEEN ‘ANTAGONISM’ AND ‘FUNDAMENTALISM’

What is immediately noticeable in the four episodes described is the lack of an ‘adversary/antagonist’ capable of hindering the hero’s path to his or her glory. This somewhat upsets the morphology of the fairy tale more or less theorized by Propp, according to which in every tale of deeds one can recognize a ‘sender’ and a ‘recipient’, a ‘subject’ and an ‘object’, a ‘helper’ and an ‘antagonist’. A typical fairytale structure is one whereby a certain king (sender) wants to twin with another kingdom (recipient) through his son’s marriage. However, the princess of the other kingdom is held captive and so the king sends a prince (subject) to free the princess (object). Along the way, the prince meets a wizard/sorceress (helper) who provides him with useful tools to defeat the dragon (antagonist) which is guarding the princess.

In Ondal’s saga, the sender is Heaven/Fate, the recipient is the kingdom of Koguryŏ. The subject is Ondal, the object is the military victory of Koguryŏ. The helper is the princess, but who is the antagonist? In the story of Kyŏnggang, the sender is Heaven, the recipient is the people of Korea. The subject is Kyŏnggang, the object is the foundation of the kingdom of Koryŏ. The

⁴³ This is the future queen Kyŏnghŏn 景獻, who allegedly gave birth to four sons and two daughters. The eldest son would have been Sejo 世祖.

⁴⁴ Another tale concerning the foundation of Koryŏ has, as protagonist, Hōgyŏng 虎景, a hunter (equally skilled in archery as Chumong) whose legitimacy to become an ancestor of the dynasty is decided by a tiger-spirit. In any case, therefore, he is a passive hero. Possibly, both stories (later quoted in *Chewang un’gi* and *Koryŏsa*) originally have as main source the *P’yŏnnyŏn t’ongnok* 編年通錄 (*Comprehensive Historical Chronology*), now lost, written by a certain Kim Kwan’i 金寬毅, whose life may reasonably be placed in the Middle Koryŏ Period, so to around the 12th century. This is the period of ‘systemization’ of historiography in Korea, but also an epoch of internal disorder in which works of propaganda in favor of the ruling dynasty would have been welcomed at the court of Kaegyŏng 開京. In this regard, among the possible scopes of *P’yŏnnyŏn t’ongnok*, Hō Inuk (2003, especially 25 ff.) hypothesizes that of strengthening the role of capital Kaegyŏng against the aristocracy retaining sympathy for old Silla.



helper is the dragon king, but there is no antagonist. The fox-spirit, in fact, is the adversary of the dragon king and not of Kyōnggang.

The same goes for the story of Yōng'o and Seo and for the story of Kim Hyōn. This lack of an adversary/antagonist remains a characteristic feature (with few exceptions) of the tales of ancient times (especially those showing passive heroes), at least on the evidence of the (scarce) literary material that has come down to us. The case of the *Suijōn* is illuminating, as this work is the oldest Korean collection of stories that has come down to us (albeit only partially, in fragments reported in later works). The stories that are definitely attributable to the *Suijōn* are twelve in number, but only in one (*The tale of Ado* 阿道) we can recognize the presence of antagonists, who are represented by the very people of Silla and a king hostile to Buddhism.⁴⁵ Ado himself can be considered a passive hero in that the task of preacher is assigned to him by his mother. For the rest, in the episode of Wōngwang 圓光, the noisy and disturbing monk is the antagonist of the spirit of the mountain and not of the protagonist. Even in the episode of Chigwi 地鬼 (or 志鬼), who is not a passive hero, the protagonist fails to meet Queen Sōndōk 善德, not due to some external impediment, but only because he falls asleep at the crucial moment.

One could say that the episodes of Lady Suro 水路 and Chōyong 處容 recorded in the *Samguk yusa* show the figure of an antagonist, but this is highly debatable. In no way, in fact, may Lady Suro be considered a 'heroine' for she does not make any decisions and does not react in any way to what has happened to her. Simply, Lady Suro is kidnapped by the sea dragon and returned to her family following an exorcism performed by the locals. As for Chōyong, the evil spirit is an indirect and casual adversary, because he lies with a woman who is Chōyong's wife but who may have been anyone's wife. Moreover, the Chōyong episode takes place during the reign of King Hōngang 憲康 (875–886), that is, at the threshold of the 'Korean Middle Ages', and is recorded in a text of the thirteenth century, a time when the 'heroic' narrative was already in a phase of secularization.

In the tales presented here, creating the hero is the will of Heaven (or Fate) that shapes him/her either directly (the moving rocks of Yōng'o and Seo)⁴⁶ or through supernatural beings (the dragon-king and the tiger-woman) and through humans possessing extraordinary and even para-normal qualities (the princess of Koguryō). Nothing stands in the way of the hero's path to glory: the very death of Ondal is, in fact, nothing other than a heroic apotheosis that places him rightfully in history. In the stories described, there is no violated moral code that the hero must restore, there is no evil character to defeat, and there is no abuse of any kind that must be punished.

Things change (and this is really interesting) in subsequent periods, where the passive hero (real or imaginary) of the story achieves this heroic status thanks above all to resistance against elements or characters that disturb moral and social rules. Now, between humans and the 'Absolute/Divinity' there are a series of obstacles of a cultural nature represented by such things as morality, politics, bureaucracy and social class. In this way, often the passive hero takes and shows a 'defensive fundamentalism' that brings him/her closer to becoming the saint or the martyr, but

⁴⁵ At the beginning of his preaching, Ado suffers the hostility of the people but later, thanks to a miraculous recovery he has made at the royal court, he earns the esteem and favor of King Mich'u 味鄒 (r. 262–284). Mich'u's successor, however, did not offer the same. This was Yurye 儒禮, who reigned from 284 to 298. Note how the name 'Yurye' literally means 'Confucian rite', to emphasize the ideological orientation of the sovereign who, precisely because of this, may have been hostile to Buddhism.

⁴⁶ This is admitted also by the protagonist of the story: once in Japan, in fact, Yōng'o speaks like a king: to the ambassador of Silla who orders him to go back to Korea, he replies: 'If I am here, this is Heaven's will' (我到这天也).



not only that: the passive hero also becomes an agent of political propaganda in the context of the instrumental use of literature.

A few examples suffice to demonstrate this. Already in the Koryŏ period, Yi Kok's 李穀 *Chuk-puinjŏn* 竹夫人傳 (*Tale of the Bamboo Wife*),⁴⁷ while exalting the chastity of the protagonist, a truly passive hero abandoned by her husband,⁴⁸ criticizes indirectly but sharply the sexual customs of the age and, at the same time, makes political propaganda: the author writes in favor of an ideology that, while protecting family values and exalting the ethics of the husband-wife relationship, (one of the 'Five great human relations' [*oryun* 五倫] of Confucianism), ideally reestablishes that harmony between sky and earth which is indispensable for the creation of a virtuous state. As literature is, *in primis*, a historical phenomenon, the Bamboo Wife represents, as other pseudo-biographies, the formidable intellectual challenge of a political opposition that, while facing the institutional crisis of the time by playing the role of loser (in a context where Buddhism still is the predominant ideology), already anticipates the *coup d'état* and the overthrow of the dynasty. It is an authentic instrumental use of literature, perfectly in accord with the prominence of study and culture (an authentic unit of measurement of the value of man) supported and defended by Confucianism.

In this case, the mechanism that creates the hero is 'Defensive Fundamentalism', that is, the elaboration and further development of a concept originating in Lacan's philosophy and applied to cultural history from the perspective and standpoint of Structuralism. According to this theory, 'Defensive Fundamentalism' stands for that particular attitude through which a 'minor' entity, like a vassal state or a community suffering discrimination, tries to redeem itself and establish its own identity by confronting the dominating entity with greater moral rigor. This 'fundamentalist' feeling is often manipulated and codified by the political/religious groups/parties in the same minority community until it becomes an authentic 'dogma'. In this way, once that minority succeeds in coming to power, it uses such a 'dogma' in order to legitimize and perpetuate itself.⁴⁹ In the case of the Bamboo Wife, the passive hero proclaims her superiority by simply defending 'righteousness' (or what is considered to be right) against the dominant thought⁵⁰ and meanwhile she waits to make herself dominant according to the cycle of political events and the passage of history.

⁴⁷ The bamboo wife is an object, still used today, that Koreans use to 'hug' on hot summer nights in order to find some coolness. The story in question belongs precisely to the genre of pseudo-biography or prosopopoeia (*kajŏn* 假傳 or *üiin sŏsŏl* 擬人小說), where the protagonists are personified objects. Originating in the Koryŏ 高麗 period (918–1392), this literary genre continued until the early Chosŏn 朝鮮 period (1392–1910).

⁴⁸ This short story is found in book 101 of the *Tongmunsŏn* 東文選 (Literary Anthology of the Eastern Country). In homage to the genre of prosopopoeia to which it belongs, the husband, eighteen years older, is a pine with the vocation of a hermit life, and he turns into a rock during a pilgrimage to the mountains. His wife will eventually receive the title of *chŏlbu* 節婦, 'virtuous wife'. The bibliography on this story and its themes is not very extensive: see, among others, Kim Ch'angnyong 2005 and An Pyŏngsŏl 1990. Also see Riotto 2013.

⁴⁹ Apropos of defensive fundamentalism in the West and especially in Late Antiquity, see Veyne 1995: 157 ff. About defensive fundamentalism in Korean history and literature see Riotto 2011.

⁵⁰ The licentiousness of the costumes in Koryŏ, which also transpires in popular compositions such as the *Ssang-hwajŏm* 雙花店 (The dumpling shop), was in fact also known to foreigners: it is a fact that the diplomat Xu Jing 徐兢 (1091–1153), an embassy appointee to Koryŏ in 1123, emphasizes the 'lewdness' of the inhabitants of that reign in various passages of his *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經, known in Korean as *Koryŏ Togyŏng* 高麗圖經. Xu states, among other things, that 'men and women bathe together in the river and they are not ashamed of this' (book 23). On the other hand, Xu Jing was heir to a much stronger Confucian tradition than the one that prevailed in Korea at that time and therefore it is not surprising that he wrote about Koryŏ in such a negative way.



The Chosŏn period saw the birth of the classic novel (*kojŏn sosŏl* 古典小說), which from the 17th century became the most representative prose of that period. Now the works are longer, the plots more complex, the characters more numerous. Moreover, the society of the time is now well described with all its discriminations and contradictions. The genres are very diversified and the protagonists of the moment take on all the possible nuances of a real or fictional hero. Examining in detail the literary genres of late Chosŏn is beyond the scope of this article; I will limit myself only to citing a particular genre which is that of the adventures of prisoners of war following the terrible conflict between Korea and Japan of 1592–1598 and the Manchu invasions of Korea in 1627 and 1636. War prisoners, either civil or military, are the passive heroes *par excellence*, but they also are the ones who have the antagonist *par excellence*, i.e. the enemies who have taken them prisoner. We have thus novels such as the *Kyangnŏk* 看羊錄 (Diary of a shepherd) by Kang Hang 姜沆 (1567–1618) and the *Cho Wanbyŏkchŏn* 趙完壁傳, whose best version is that of Yi Sugwang 李睟光 (1563–1628). In these cases, the protagonists really existed. Conversely, works such as *Chŏe Chŏkchŏn* 崔陟傳 (Story of Chŏe Chŏk) by Cho Wihan 趙緯韓 (1567–1649) and *Kim Yŏngchŏlchŏn* 金永哲傳 (Story of Kim Yŏngchŏl) by Hong Set'ae 洪世泰 (1653–1725) have fictional characters as protagonists. In all these cases we have the passive hero and the antagonist, but not always defensive fundamentalism, given that the escape of a prisoner of war can be considered something natural and not cultural. Here instead I will present two very famous cases, where the passive hero reacts vigorously against his apparent destiny to the point of showing a real defensive fundamentalism.

An illuminating literary case is the *Inhyŏn wanghujŏn* 仁顯王后傳 (Story of Queen Inhyŏn). The Tale of Queen Inhyŏn is a classical novel by an anonymous author, inspired by a true event that happened at the Korean Court in 1689, the so-called *kisa hwan'guk* 己巳換局 or the ousting from the throne of Queen Min 閔 (1667–1701: Inhyŏn is her posthumous name). Various versions of this novel exist⁵¹ but the core of the story seems to have been written in the early 18th century.

The plot is as follows. The sterility of the Queen (wife of Sukchong 肅宗, 19th king of the Yi dynasty, who reigned from 1674 to 1720) means that the royal couple do not have an heir, but the Crown Prince is born instead in 1688 to a woman called Chang 張 (1659–1701), one of the king's concubines. Under pressure from the concubine and the party of *Namin* 南人 (the Southerners), her allies, the King removes the legitimate Queen from her position and promoted Chang who, in this way, from *hŭibin* 禧嬪 (Royal Concubine) actually becomes *chungjŏng* 中正 or Queen Consort. The *Sŏin* 西人 (Westerners), functionaries and literati who oppose such a decision, pay for their loyalty with exile or even death, as in the case of Pak T'aeho 朴泰輔 (1654–1689). Nevertheless, the situation changes in 1694: the *Sŏin* return to power and Queen Min is restored to her former position. For this reason, the concubine Chang, who is furious, begins to plot against the Queen's life. After an unsuccessful attempt to poison her rival, the concubine summons sorcerers and shamanesses to Court in order to cast an evil spell on the Queen. Eventually the concubine seems to have won her battle: after several years of exorcisms, the Queen, victim of a mysterious illness, dies in 1701 at the age of 34. But Chang's crime does not remain unpunished: shortly after these terrible events, the King dreams of the deceased Queen, who informs him of the actual reason for her death. On discovering evidence of the conspiracy, the King's indignation and desire for revenge are terrible as he had by then learned to appreciate the extraordinary virtues of his

⁵¹ On the various texts of this novel see, among others, Pak Yosun 1972 and Kim Sin'yŏn 1992.



late queen. Eventually the concubine is forced to drink poison, while her brother Hūijae 張希載 (?–1701), an important accessory to the plot, is also executed and his property confiscated. The King alone survives with his pain, regrets and nightmares.

Given its nature as a historical novel based on real facts, the *Tale of Queen Inhyōn* cannot have a happy ending. Nevertheless, thanks to the repentance of the King and the restoration of the former political order, the novel is a vehicle for morality and political propaganda.

In this regard, whoever the author may be, there is no doubt that he or she belonged to the *Sōin* party. However, apart from the limits represented by the historical background, the apologetic and partisan nature of the *Tale of Queen Inhyōn* led to an idealization of the characters. Such idealization is achieved through a radicalization of the characters' passions: the defensive fundamentalism of Queen Inhyōn and Pak T'aebo (the passive heroes) are opposed to the hysterical aggressiveness of the concubine (the 'Proppian' antagonist) who represents the corruption of power and institutions. The King (who in a Confucian context cannot be 'Evil' but the 'victim' of Evil) is portrayed as a simple instrument of Fate and eventually he is able to redeem himself on learning of and punishing the deception of Chang and the *Namin* against him.

In this novel the defensive fundamentalism of the Queen lies in her serenity and imperturbability, her control over passion and her 'passivity' even after she is unjustly put aside by the King. It is the triumph of ataraxia, or, if you want, of the *wuqing* 無情, a condition of harmony between the self and the world.⁵² But while in contexts like the Taoist one, the 'world' consists mainly in primordial nature, in a Confucian context, where man is more the 'measure of things', the 'world' is the politicized reality of society and its institutions. Pak T'aebo (whose inquisition and death are considered by some scholars to have been a later insertion to the plot of the novel) goes so far as to become a martyr, the highest grade attainable by a passive hero.⁵³ Even after suffering atrocious torture which will lead to his death, he never refrains from showing his solidarity with the Queen. On the other hand, Pak's fundamentalism allows him express and defend his political thought (viz., the Confucian orthodoxy of *Sōin*).

The story of Ch'unhyang (*Ch'unhyangjōn* 春香傳) does not need any special introduction and so I will recount the plot very briefly.⁵⁴ In the city of Namwōn 南原, in the present-day province of northern Chōlla 全羅北道, a secret love breaks out between Ch'unhyang, the daughter of a former *kisaeng* 妓生 (entertainer) and Mongnyong 夢龍, the aristocratic son of the local governor. All is well until Mongnyong's father is recalled to Seoul and his place is taken by an evil magistrate named Pyōn Hakto 卞學道. The latter tries to take possession of Ch'unhyang who, however, faithful to the oath made to Mongnyong, decisively refuses his advances. In revenge for this, the evil governor has her imprisoned and tortured, but the girl remains inflexible in her actions.⁵⁵

⁵² It is, in other words, what Jullien (1991) calls 'fadeur' (tastelessness) with reference to actions and reactions in front of the world. For the rest, I agree with Ma and Van Brakel (2021) in finding a substantial identity between *wuqing* and *wuwei* 無為, at least in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.

⁵³ On the conflict of passions in the *Inhyōn wanghujōn* see Riotto 2004.

⁵⁴ The story of Ch'unhyang is also one of the most famous scripts (*madang*) of *p'ansori*, a genre of sung-recitation of stories, typical of the Chōlla region, which became popular from the end of the 17th century. The question of whether the novel predates the *p'ansori* version or vice-versa is still controversial. Regarding the bibliography, articles on this novel are legion, also because the work has been the subject of many exploitations, especially from a political point of view (Kim Yōngmin 2007, Kwōn Sun'gūng 2019). For a philological edition of this novel see Sōl Sōnggyōng 1995.

⁵⁵ On the passive heroine Ch'unhyang and the pain of her emotions (desire, loneliness, etc.) see Ryu Chunggyōng 2007.



Meanwhile, however, Mongnyong, who has never forgotten Ch'unhyang, passes the state exams in Seoul and is sent to Namwŏn as the king's inspector. The happy ending triumphs: Mongnyong severely punishes the evil magistrate and marries Ch'unhyang, who because of her heroic behavior has obtained an annulment of the disparity in class with her husband.

What interests us here, however, is that the 'passive hero', Ch'unhyang, uses Confucian fundamentalism to redeem herself from her own social status and to proclaim the moral superiority of the rural areas over the corrupt capital materialized and symbolized in the evil governor Pyŏn Hakto, the 'antagonist' of the heroine. In this regard, we can also notice that the passive heroes who in ancient times were men, in later periods are mainly women.

The work is a hymn to conjugal love, but the unshakable perseverance of the protagonist that drives her to tolerate imprisonment and torture ends by exalting fidelity, making it a pillar and a guarantee of the institutions and of the state itself. A novel of popular origin, fully codified in the course of the 18th century and in many aspects similar to a fairy tale, the *Tale of Ch'unhyang* treats a topic like that of love which was not easy to deal with within the strict morality of Confucianism and the rules of a strongly classist society. In spite of this (and although some versions are not free from clear erotic allusions),⁵⁶ the novel (as well as the text for *p'ansori*) was welcomed by the ruling class who traditionally observed the strictest rules of Confucianism. Thanks to its appreciation by the literati, the novel rose beyond the regional context in which it was born and developed, and embraced a more erudite form which was enriched with citations from the Chinese classics. This was possible thanks to the process of the cultural 'popularization' which Korea was undertaking, both in arts and in literature, from the 17th century.⁵⁷

And still the 'regional' nature of the novel cannot be ignored. It must not be forgotten that Korea was and still is a country where regional parochialism and local pride play an important part in the life of the national collective. Specifically, this work expresses its love for the region of Chŏlla 全羅, whose natural and monumental beauties are carefully described. But its main objective is that of imparting a moral message capable of exalting and emphasizing the superiority of the ethical values of the province over the degradation and corruption of the capital (and thereby of official power) in a cultural context, like that of Korea, where anything concerning the 'provinces' was considered rough, vulgar, and even 'impure'. The *Tale of Ch'unhyang* is an 'alternative' document of dissent which shows that the country (and the Confucian State was already facing a deep crisis from which it would not recover) must have recourse to the pure values of the provinces and be able to draw new force from them in order to be saved. Anyone who is virtuous, without distinction of social class, can help the country: this is also, more or less, the message of *Sirhak* 實學 thought, which fully flourished in the 18th century, as a further proof that it is not possible to dissociate literature from history.

In this way, the immense bridal love of Ch'unhyang becomes, in the ideological context of the time, an instrument of 'revenge' that, in the middle of a crisis of ethics where the ruling classes of the capital are corrupt and adrift, saves and honors the institutions through strict observance

⁵⁶ There are numerous texts of this work that have come down to us. On the various texts of *Ch'unhyangjŏn* see, among others, Anonymous, 1993. The erotic aspects have at times been censored in modern editions, especially in North Korea: the 1956 edition by the North Korean Ping Wi 冰蔚 and the Chinese Zhang Youluan 張友鸞 is very eloquent in this regard. On this edition see Wang Piyŏn 2014.

⁵⁷ Precisely because of its universal and 'melodramatic' contents (love, conflict between good and evil, class struggle), this novel became an icon of Korean culture even in the following centuries, and remains so today. On the fortune of the *Ch'unhyangjŏn* as a symbol of Korean identity see, among the most recent works, Yi Minyŏng 2021.



of moral principles. At the same time, the novel states that every citizen, notwithstanding class or regional distinction, can play the role of the perfect subject of the state. The bridal love of Ch'unhyang thereby thus becomes the defensive fundamentalism of a passive hero, capable of redeeming the popular class and the provinces.

FINAL REMARKS

It is clear that the literature of the most ancient periods appears less linked to the contingent and to reality compared to later works, thus showing a more spiritual and less materialistic connotation. The passive hero therefore appears to be a character chosen by Heaven to carry out meritorious deeds in the context of relatively less complex and 'politicized' societies. We do not know on the basis of which criteria the protagonists of the stories of the most ancient period are selected by the decrees of Heaven: Ondal is a poor man, Yŏng'ŏ and Seo are a fisherman and a fisherwoman,⁵⁸ Kim Hyŏn is a commoner. It is not excluded that due to the strong influence of Buddhist thought, the glory achieved by the characters can be understood as a kind of karmic reward.⁵⁹

Kyŏnggang's story already shows some differences. He is presented as the son of Emperor Suzong of the Tang and is part of a Heavenly 'project' that will end with the founding of Koryŏ. It seems clear, however, that the story of Kyŏnggang was conceived and told in a much later period (between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) as part of a literary propaganda aimed at legitimizing and glorifying the ruling dynasty. We are therefore already in an intermediate stage in which the passive protagonist has no antagonists, but is already used as a political tool. We must think, at this point, that the similar story reported by Iryŏn in *Samguk yusa* and set in Silla (and perhaps inspiring the story of Kyŏnggang) is much older, and in fact it has as its protagonist a completely ordinary man, Kŏt'aji, a simple archer from Prince Yangp'ae's escort.

In subsequent periods (and especially after the birth of the classic novel in the 17th century), the passive hero often finds himself fighting and resisting fiercely and painfully before emerging as such. Quoting Lukács, we can say that the epic world of antiquity is a homogeneous world and 'even the separation of man and world, of you and me, does not manage to alter this uniformity. Like every other member of this rhythmic harmony, the soul is in the middle of the world' (Lukács 1962: 60). From this perspective, the hero of antiquity is not even an individual, but is the whole collective.

In contrast, the novel is the epic of a world abandoned by the gods, and the psychology of the novel's hero belongs to the demonic sphere. The epic/ancient heroes (think of Odysseus), despite all the adventures they have traveled through, remain essentially passive, because the gods must always triumph over the demons and those adventures are in reality 'the representation of the

⁵⁸ However, it should not be forgotten that in various literatures and mythologies fishing and royalty are associated: in Sumerian literature Dumuzi (Akkadian: Tammuz) is a fisherman (but also a shepherd), St. Peter is a fisherman, as well as the 'fisher king' of the Arthurian cycle.

⁵⁹ It is well known that Far Eastern fantastic literature owes much to imported Buddhist fiction (just think of the Chinese *zhiguai* 志怪 and *chuanqi* 傳奇). However, the shamanic substratum that transpires in some details of the stories should not be forgotten. To give just one example, in a cultural context in which the interaction between men and tigers is even atavistic, the presence of the tigress in a Buddhist temple in the tale *Kim Hyŏn and the tigress* reveals the religious syncretism between Buddhism and local cults that occurred not only in Korea but throughout the Far East.



objective and extensive totality of the world' and the hero is the 'interior most immobile point of the rhythmic movement of the world' (Lukács 1962: 73). The passive heroes of the novel, on the other hand, distinguish, demonstrate, and characterize their relationship with their own souls and with the world around them.

This also applies to Korean literature. Indeed, it can be said that it is precisely the antagonists who create passive heroes. The opponents are formidable, Heaven no longer gives anything away, and everything must be hard earned: looking at the few (but famous) examples we have seen, the Bamboo Wife does not have a personified antagonist, but she must yet defend herself from a strict moralism that was more and more gaining ground; Inhyŏn must defend herself from the political party represented by her rival; Ch'unhyang must defend herself from the social disparity that allows the evil governor to subject her to torture. It is probably a symptom of that 'loss of sacredness' that occurs in complex, bureaucratized and politicized civilizations,⁶⁰ where humans satisfy their own self-centeredness by becoming 'Judges on Earth' of good and evil, thus replacing the higher 'entities'. The heroes, passive and otherwise, have simply become men and women, as already foretold by Hesiod who, after the lineage of heroes, placed the disgraced and hopeless Iron Age, that is to say, the current one.

In conclusion, I can summarize what I have said as follows:

- 1) The narrative structures of the Korean stories of the ancient period (1st millennium AD) have a legendary-fatalistic background, which in many cases shows a passive hero but neither an antagonist nor defensive fundamentalism.
- 2) The stories of the Koryŏ period (918–1392) also have the figure of the passive hero, but these, although often not having a true and proper antagonist, are already beginning to deal with political-cultural superstructures (The Bamboo Wife), and this is also noticeable in stories referring to the earlier period: the story of Kyŏnggang is clearly a work of political propaganda. Defensive fundamentalism is also beginning to glimmer, already perceptible in the *Story of the bamboo wife*.
- 3) In the Chosŏn period (1392–1910), especially from the birth of the classical novel onwards, the antagonist of the passive hero appears much more frequently, and in some cases this ends up causing, through an action-reaction effect, the defensive fundamentalism of his counterpart, against the background of a strongly classist, moralistic and politicized society that is also now well depicted in the plot.

What has been said here obviously should not be regarded in an absolute, categorical, or dogmatic way, but it certainly describes an historical tendency that is clearly evident and verifiable.

⁶⁰ Acquaviva 1971. The 'loss of sacredness' is, before all, the loss of that 'sacred time' within which each individual found a role in pre-industrial societies. It is not a mere chance, in this regard, that the dates of feasts (the feast is the sacred time *par excellence*) of the new religions often coincide (e.g. Christmas and *Sol Invictus*) with the dates of older religions, as the life of ancient societies was marked and regulated by a time that was essentially a 'sacred time'.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Humanities Korea Plus Project through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2019S1A6A3A03058791).

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Nota bene: The abbreviation T. refers to the work *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*.

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