

## Notes on a Lost Book: Philological Questions and Symbols of the *Sui-jŏn*

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**Abstract:** This article deals with *Sui-jŏn*, an almost unknown work not only in the West but also scarcely studied in Korea itself. Written most likely between the 10th and 12th centuries, on the basis of older, unidentifiable sources, the *Sui-jŏn* appears to have been primarily a collection of fantastic tales. Today it is largely lost, but its partial reconstruction is possible through various fragments reported in later works. Precisely on the basis of these fragments, in the first part this article attempts to reconstruct, as far as possible, what must have been the nature of the book, its author, its genesis, its dating. In the second part, the symbology of some natural elements that appear in the fragments of the work is spoken of. It is a symbolism that belongs, in similar forms, to many cultures of the world, but which in the case of Korea becomes, in its presentation, a real milestone, being present in the oldest Korean work of its kind that came down to us, although partially.

**Keywords:** *Sui-jŏn*, Korea's fantastic literature, Korean classic literature, Literature of the Koryŏ period

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### 1. Prologue: Just a book of stories?

The *Sui-jŏn* 殊異傳 (Unusual stories) is certainly a work that raises many questions. Probably written in the 11th century and cited many times as a source by 13th century authors such as Kakhun 覺訓 (? – ca 1230), Iryŏn 一然 (1206–1289) and Yi Sŏnghyu 李承休 (1224–1300), it is lost in itself, but partially reconstructed through fragments carried over from later works.<sup>1</sup> It is from these fragments that it seems clear that this work must have been

<sup>1</sup> Among the modern editions of the work see Yi Tonggŭn ed. 2011, Yi Taehyŏng ed. 2018 and KIM Hyŏnyang et al. eds 1996. The Italian translation of all twelve fragments reported in the oldest works is found in RIOTTO 2014.

a collection of fantastic stories, emulating a Chinese literary genre, that of the *xiaoshuo* 小說 (little story), which was almost ten centuries older.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese *xiaoshuo* are already mentioned in the *Qian Han shu* 前漢書 (History of the Former Han), whose author, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), also explains their popular origin. Of the fifteen *xiaoshuo* mentioned by Ban Gu none has come down to us, but from how the great historian talks about it we can already glimpse that the topics of this literary genre ranged significantly, embracing very various topics and, among these, also esotericism and magic: a feature that will last over time.<sup>3</sup>

The post-Han *xiaoshuo* are mostly enriched biographies, various anecdotes, humorous stories and, indeed, ‘strange stories’. The latter are called *zhiguai* 志怪 (Korean: chigoe. Literally: ‘Annotated oddities’) or *chuanqi* 傳奇 (Korean *chŏn’gi*. Literally: ‘Tales of strange events’)<sup>4</sup> and their legacy was certainly collected in Korea, to the point of being able to be reasonably indicated among the main inspirers of the *Sui-jŏn*.<sup>5</sup> The origin and proliferation of this type of stories has not yet been sufficiently explained, but what is certain is that Taoist and Buddhist elements predominate in their contents. If we consider that they are born (or at least are strengthened) almost simultaneously with the arrival of Buddhism in China, we have the right to imagine that the encounter of the new creed with Taoism has stimulated a convergence of narrative interests towards the points of contact between the two systems of thought, in a sort of ‘comparative vision’.

Among the Chinese *xiaoshuo/zhiguai* one of the best known is certainly the *Soushenji* 搜神記 (In search of spirits: written memories), composed, presumably in thirty books,<sup>6</sup> by Gan Bao 干寶 (?–336). The author is said

<sup>2</sup> This literary genre does not have much to do with the legends present in the Classics such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子: in many cases it was a question of stories heard here and there by small officials, often those sent to the province, and then put in writing, and precisely this origin would justify their self-derogatory name. Regarding the *Sui-jŏn*, YU Chŏngil 2004: 218–238 perhaps exaggerates in considering it a forerunner of the Korean novel. In fact, if in China the fantastic genre had a certain continuity through the centuries, the same has not happened in Korea.

<sup>3</sup> On the origin and development of the *xiaoshuo* see, among others, CAMPANY 1996: 28–29, 46–99, 102–126, and ZHAO 2005: 163–168.

<sup>4</sup> The terms *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* are often considered synonymous. A possible distinction is that in the *chuanqi* we can find better literary quality and the role of the human being more active and less dependent on supernatural forces.

<sup>5</sup> The comparison between the *Sui-jŏn* and Chinese works of the same genre is certainly not lacking: see, for example, KIM Taehyŏn 1999 and KIM Chisŏn 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Today only twenty books remain, revised by the scholar Hu Yuanrui 胡元瑞 (1551–1602) in the Ming 明 (1368–1644) period.

to have become interested in the supernatural after a member of his family survived for ten years in a closed tomb thanks to a ghost who brought him food: in any case, Gan Bao's tales are mostly 'cold', detached, aseptic, true chronicles of mystery in a style very similar to the one we find in many episodes of the *Sui-jŏn*. Moreover, some details present in *Sui-jŏn* tales (such as, for example, the beautiful girls kept inside the bamboo box), are already similarly reported in Chinese works, such as the tale of the Taoist in the basket reported in the *Lingui zhi* 靈鬼志 (Chronicles of spirits and ghosts).

The list of collections of *zhiguai* stories is long: in addition to those already mentioned, in fact, we can remember the *Lieyizhuan* 列異傳 (Biographies of extraordinary characters) by Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226),<sup>7</sup> the *Bowuji* 博物志 (Chronicles of the vast knowledge)<sup>8</sup> by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300), the *Soushen houji* 搜神後記 (Chronicles after *Soushenji*), even attributed to the great Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427),<sup>9</sup> the *Youminglu* 幽明錄 (Notes of light and dark)<sup>10</sup> by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), the *Shiyiji* 拾遺記 (Chronicles of collected testimonies) by Wang Jia 王嘉 (?–390), etc. Some of these works have not survived, others exist in fragments, such as the *Sui-jŏn*, still others have been saved, and among these above all those that have been incorporated into great compilation works such as the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Enlarged news of the Taiping Era).

In China, the trend of fantastic tales continued even after the sixth century and practically up to the modern age. The serious losses suffered by the ancient and 'medieval' Korean literary heritage, however, do not always allow us to follow the path of the fantastic genre in Korea. Very likely it was already present at the time of Unified Silla: the work *Kyerim chapchŏn* 鷄林雜傳 (Various stories of Kyerim/Silla) by Kim Taemun 金大問,<sup>11</sup> now lost, almost certainly must have belonged to this genre and, indeed, may have been a source of *Sui-jŏn* itself. In the Koryŏ period the *Pŏphwa yŏnghŏm-jŏn* 法華靈驗傳 (Miraculous tales of the *Lotus Sūtra*)<sup>12</sup> is noteworthy, but the genre

<sup>7</sup> He is the well-known emperor Wen 文 of Wei 魏. However, the authorship of Cao Pi is anything but sure.

<sup>8</sup> This book had a similar fate to that of the *Sui-jŏn*, because, also lost, it survives today in fragments found in other works.

<sup>9</sup> Doubts about the authorship of the work date back at least to the Ming period, thanks to the studies of Shen Shilong 沈士龍.

<sup>10</sup> Also written 幽冥錄 and said *Youmingji* 幽冥記. It had twenty books according to *Sui shu* 隋書 (Book of Sui), book 33, thirty books according to various other sources. The work was probably lost at the time of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1126).

<sup>11</sup> *Samguk sagi*: book 46.

<sup>12</sup> It was compiled by the monk Yowŏn 了圓 in the 14th century, first printed (perhaps) in 1377 and republished various times starting from 1534. This work draws on Chinese sources such as

continues in the Chosŏn 朝鮮 period, also in works with particular and, in some ways, even adventurous backgrounds. This is the case, for example, with the *Kūmo sinhwa* 金鰲新話 (New stories of Kūmo) written by Kim Sisŭp 金時習 (1435–1493) around 1470. The work is a collection of short stories, of which only five have come down to us, considered by many to be an authentic precursor of the Korean classic novel (*kojŏn sosŏl* 古典小說). Strongly indebted for its contents to the Chinese work *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 (New stories for trimmed candlelight)<sup>13</sup> from previous decades, the *Kūmo sinhwa* deals extensively with the supernatural world, with a very pessimistic perspective, which gives his stories (at least, the ones that have come down to us) a decidedly negative ending.<sup>14</sup>

Continuing, there will be many other works such as the *Sŏl Kongch'an-jŏn* 薛公瓚傳 (Story of Sŏl Kongch'an),<sup>15</sup> the *Wangnang panhon-jŏn* 王郎返魂傳 (Tale of the return of the spirit of Mr. Wang),<sup>16</sup> written in 1637, but whose origin dates back, perhaps, even to the late Koryŏ period, etc.

At least apparently, therefore, the *Sui-jŏn* is undoubtedly a work of fantastic literature. However, almost no one has sufficiently considered a sentence by Yi

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the *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳 (Biographical recounts for the diffusion and praise of the *Lotus Sūtra*), by Huixiang 慧詳 (ca 639–706), and Korean sources, such as the (today lost) *Haedongjŏn hongnok* 海東傳弘錄 (Large selection of edifying stories from Korea), by monk Ch'ŏnch'aek 天頌.

<sup>13</sup> It was written in 1398 by Qu You 瞿佑 (1347–1433 or, according other sources, 1341–1427).

<sup>14</sup> This very aspect, together with the use of Chinese, weakens its candidacy as precursor of the classic novel. For the rest, the widespread pessimism of the work fits well with the private life of the author, one of the leading representatives of those *pang'oein* 方外人 (marginalised) writers who had voluntarily renounced any relationship with official institutions.

<sup>15</sup> This work is also recorded as *Sŏl Kongch'an hwanhon-jŏn* 薛公瓚還魂傳 (Story of the return of the spirit of Sŏl Kongch'an) in the *P'aegwan chapki* 稗官雜記 (Various notes of a low officer) by Ŏ Sukkwŏn 魚叔權, a man of letters who flourished in the first half of the 16th century. It was written in Chinese around 1510 by Ch'ae Su 蔡壽 (1449–1515). Due to its scabrous content (the plot tells of a brother and a sister, who died prematurely, whose ghosts return to earth to torment their cousin), which had soon accelerated its diffusion by means of Korean translations, it was forbidden and condemned to the stake as a disturbance of public morality. Condemned to oblivion by official powers, the work, albeit incomplete, miraculously reappeared in a private archive in 1996, hidden among the pages of a copy of the *Mukchae ilgi* 默齋日記 (Diary of Mukchae, pseudonym of the author) whose original had been written by Yi Mungŏn 李文樞 (1494–1567). The first official announcement of the discovery of the work was given by the Seoul newspaper *Chung'ang ilbo* 中央日報 on April 27, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Also called *Wangnang-jŏn* 王郎傳 (Story of Mr. Wang). The oldest text is from 1637 but its origin dates back, perhaps, even to the late Koryŏ period. It is sometimes attributed to the Buddhist monk Pou, who could be either the Pou 普愚 of the Koryŏ period, who lived from 1301 to 1382, or the Pou 普雨 of the Chosŏn period, who lived from 1509 to 1565. It tells of a very close married couple who, divided by death, manage to reunite thanks to the mercy of Yŏmna 閻羅, the ruler of the dead.

Sŭnghyu, in the preface to book 2 of the *Chewang un'gi* 帝王韻紀:

謹據國史旁採各本紀與夫殊異傳所載...

(In drafting the text I based myself first of all on *National History* [*Kuksa* 國史], but I did not neglect to consult other sources such as the *Original Chronicles* [Pon'gi 本紀] and the *Unusual Stories* [*Sui-jŏn* 殊異傳]) ...

In composing the *Chewang un'gi*, a work with an exclusive historical-mythological content, Yi Sŭnghyu therefore used the *Sui-jŏn* as a source. However, none of the extant fragments of the *Sui-jŏn* has any bearing on the *Chewang un'gi*: unless we consider Yi Sŭnghyu's *Sui-jŏn* a work different from the one we know (a remake written by Pak Illyang?), we must think that it also dealt extensively with history and mythology. And this would be a novelty capable of making the problems surrounding this text even more complex.

## 2. The textual tradition

Of all the situations and philological variables that can be presented by an ancient text, *Sui-jŏn* certainly has one that is particularly difficult to decipher.<sup>17</sup> We reiterate that the text, in itself, has not reached us, but in part it can be reconstructed through fragments (*ilmun* 逸文) reported in later works. But even in the face of such information and partial texts, the philologist can only hesitate before attributing them to the lost work. In the case of the *Sui-jŏn*, the question of the fragments is very complex, because in no case are we sure that the text reported is actually that of the original and not, rather, a remake of it or a summary.<sup>18</sup> In fact, we are faced with texts that are sometimes only of a few lines, lapidary and plain, sometimes several pages long, written in excellent style and abundantly 'seasoned' with highly refined poems. In some cases, such as that of the episode of Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn 崔致遠, we can argue that the text reported in the *T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae* 太平通載 is most likely an original 'fragment', but the text of the same episode reported in the *Taedong unbugunok* 大東韻府群玉, considerably reduced and lacking the poetic part, undoubtedly has the nature of a mere 'testimony/quotation'. By the other hand, the length and refinement of a text do not always prove its authenticity, because they could also be the result of subsequent interpolations.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On the whole question regarding the author and the genesis of *Sui-jŏn* see, among others, Sŏ Yŏnggyu 1993, So Inho 1987 and Kim Kŏngon 1988.

<sup>18</sup> For a general vision of the philological problems of the *Sui-jŏn* see, among others, Kwak Sŭnghun 2011.

<sup>19</sup> It is a fact that, in terms of length and literary value, the episode of Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn is to be

Thus, even before any more detailed analysis, the first problem of the *Sui-jŏn* begins to take shape: how to explain the differences in style and content between the various episodes? Did they already exist in the original or are they a result of the various interpolations made by subsequent authors in their works? So, ultimately, what kind of work was the *Sui-jŏn* really? Was it an anthology, a reasoned or indiscriminate collection of complete and summarised texts, or something else? Sometimes, the passages of the *Sui-jŏn*, as they appear reported in Korean works from the thirteenth century onwards, are so concise as to suggest that the original work shared, together with complete stories, also the summaries and the list of simple literary plots, more or less like the *Bibliotheca* (Βιβλιοθήκη) of Patriarch Photios,<sup>20</sup> without specifying the original source of the transcription.

But let us proceed in order. The title, first of all. Given that we really know nothing of the original title (just as we do not know if the work was unitary or not and if the references themselves of the later works allude to the same text), the title is reported, from time to time, as *Sui-jŏn* 殊異傳,<sup>21</sup> *Silla Sui-jŏn* 新羅殊異傳<sup>22</sup> and *Silla i-jŏn* 新羅異傳.<sup>23</sup> The reference to Silla probably is due to the fact that all the events and characters (at least those of the surviving fragments), belong to the world and culture of that State, but the clarification could also refer to the epoch in which the work was written (which could allow us to think that, for example, there could also have existed a *Sui-jŏn* of Koryŏ 高麗). But it could also be a means to distinguish that *Sui-jŏn* from other similar collections, produced in other contexts and perhaps still circulating in Korea during the Koryŏ period.

The authorship of the work is equally problematic and debated. The most widespread attribution is that to the great Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn 崔致遠 (857–?), himself the protagonist of the longest of all the surviving episodes of the work and a leading intellectual figure in the final period of Silla. However, there is no lack of attributions to other authors. The *Haedong kosŭng-jŏn* 海東高僧傳, for example, reports that the author is Pak Illyang 朴寅亮 (?–1096).<sup>24</sup>

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considered almost a 'novella', and this has been noted also by Korean scholars such as AN Ch'angsu 1997.

<sup>20</sup> BIANCHI and SCHIANO, eds 2016.

<sup>21</sup> *Samguk yusa*: book 4: '...又東京安逸戶長貞孝家在古本殊異傳...'. In this case, before the title 'Sui-jŏn' the clarification 'kobon', that is 'old book', is premised.

<sup>22</sup> See, among others: *T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae*: books 20 and 68: '...出新羅殊異傳...'; *P'irwŏn chapki*: book 2: '... 且新羅殊異傳云...'; *Chŭngbo munhŏn pigo*: book 246: '...新羅殊異傳文唱候崔致遠撰...'; etc.

<sup>23</sup> *Samguk yusa*: book 4: '...後人改作新羅異傳...'.  
<sup>24</sup> *Haedong kosŭng-jŏn*: book 1: '...若按朴寅亮殊異傳...'

A passage of the *Samguk yusa* instead also brings into play an otherwise unknown character, Kim Ch'ōngmyōng 金陟明, who would have been, if not the author, at least the 'corrector' of the *Sui-jōn*,<sup>25</sup> and at this point we can begin to make us exegetes of the thought of the ancient writers regarding the authorship of the work and to summarise the more or less explicitly the proposed possibilities:

- 1) The three characters mentioned are from time to time considered to be the authors of the *Sui-jōn*, evidently considered a unitary work, born from the brush of a single author on the basis of a specific project.
- 2) The *Sui-jōn* is a work that has gone through various versions and remakes, one of which was completed by Kim Ch'ōngmyōng, a character who lived in an unspecified period but certainly prior to the drafting of *Samguk yusa*, completed around 1280.
- 3) All three characters participated, to varying degrees, in the realisation of the *Sui-jōn*. This is currently considered the most reliable hypothesis in South Korea. In particular, Ch'oe Chiwōn would have prepared the first version of the text, subsequently expanded by Pak Illyang and finally revised and corrected by Kim Ch'ōngmyōng. Overall, a process that lasted at least a century and a half, however, would not have served the survival of the work, which seems to have already been lost in a relatively ancient era.
- 4) Under the common title of '*Sui-jōn*' there are actually different works, on each of which could have worked one of the characters described above. In this regard, the slight differences in the title (but also in the contents), reported by the later texts could offer (weak) support for this hypothesis. In addition, if the unitary work had really gone through a revision by Kim Ch'ōngmyōng or someone on his behalf, the big differences in length and style between the various episodes that have come down to us would remain inexplicable.

To these major possibilities must be added others. For example, it is legitimate to wonder what sense it makes to indicate a certain character as the 'author' of a work, such as the *Sui-jōn*, which seems to have been a collection of various myths, stories and legends. It would perhaps be more correct, therefore, to speak of 'editor' or 'compiler', and ask oneself if he was the first to bring together in a book all the folkloristic material available to him or if he in turn used previous collections and other authors. We should also ask

<sup>25</sup> *Samguk yusa*: book 4: '...鄉人金陟明後人改作新羅異傳...'. Some textual anomalies, such as the confusion between the episode of Wōngwang 圓光 and Poyang 寶壤, later taken up by Iryōn, could be the result of the remake made by Kim Ch'ōngmyōng. However, the possibility that Pak Illyang and Kim Chōngmyōng are actually the same person has also recently been suggested (KIM Chonggun 2022: 175–181).

ourselves whether the stylistic differences between the various episodes are a legacy that came directly from the original or are due, by choice or necessity, to the initiative of the person who later reported the fragments. Much more refined versions of various episodes attributable to *Sui-jŏn* and present in various classical texts, starting with *Samguk yusa*, would seem, in this regard, to favour the second hypothesis.

The question of attribution inevitably affects the very date of composition of the work. Among the three characters proposed as an author, the oldest is Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn, born in 857 and died in an unknown year, probably in the first thirty years of the 10th century. Now, leaving aside the strangeness of an author who talks about himself in a collection of anecdotes (Ch'oe is in fact the protagonist of the longest episode in the text), until he 'died at old age' (*sic*), it is clear that, accepting Ch'oe as author or compiler (obviously excluding the passage relating to his death), the *terminus ante quem non* of the drafting of the work must necessarily be placed around 890, given that the events of Ch'oe narrated in *Sui-jŏn* took place in the period of his stay in China, that is, from about 868 to 885. In this case, the *Sui-jŏn* could have been almost contemporary with the *Samdaemok* 三代目 (Catalogue of the Three epochs), the great collection of *hyangga* 鄉歌 poems, now lost, completed in the year 888 by Wihong 魏弘 and by monk Taegu Hwasang 大矩和尚<sup>26</sup> upon the order of Chinsŏng 眞聖 (r. 887–897) the last of the reigning queens of Silla, who could also have given Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn or whoever for him the task of collecting the patrimony of myths, legends and fantastic stories circulating in the kingdom of Silla either in oral or written form.<sup>27</sup>

Pak Illyang is a more authoritative candidate. Originally from Chukchu 竹州, in the Kyŏnggi 京畿 region or perhaps from P'yŏngju 平州, in the Hwanghae 黃海 region, he was undoubtedly a prominent figure in the bureaucratic and literary world of Koryŏ. We know that he passed the state examinations during the reign of Munjong 文宗 (r. 1046–1083) and immediately took up important

<sup>26</sup> The term *hwasang* (also written 和上) translates the Sanskrit *upādhyāya* उपाध्याय (Pāli: *upajjhāya*) which properly indicates a spiritual master (not necessarily a monk) who teaches the sacred texts. It is sometimes found transliterated as 烏波陀耶 (*up'adaya*) or, with the Chinese pronunciation, *niaobotuoye*. *Hwasang* in Chinese sounds *heshang*, but more often the term is specified as *jiehesang* 戒和尚 that is, more or less, 'Master who gives the precepts'.

<sup>27</sup> Almost surely, the fourteen *hyangga* 鄉歌 reported in the *Samguk yusa* were also to be found in the *Samdaemok*. Actually eleven other *hyangga* have come to us, but these have been handed down, under the overall name of *Pohyŏn sibwŏn-ga* 普賢十願歌 (The ten vows of Samantabhadra) from the *Kyunyŏ-jŏn* 均如傳 (Biography of Kyun'yŏ), and attributed precisely to this great Buddhist monk, who lived from 923 to 973. However, these are *hyangga* of the first Koryŏ period, which therefore did not belong to the world of Silla and which, for obvious chronological reasons, could not be included in the *Samdaemok*.

positions in the Public Administration. In 1075, thanks to a memorial of extraordinary eloquence, he managed to persuade the Khitan (Kōran 契丹) to abandon a military post near the Amnok 鴨綠 River.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, in 1080, as an official of the Ministry of Rites and Ceremonials, he participated together with Yu Hong 柳洪 (?–1091), in a mission to the Song 宋. During the sea voyage, however, the Korean delegation encountered a violent typhoon during which it lost many of the goods entrusted to it, and for this, upon his return to Koryō, Pak seriously risked punishment. However, he managed to stay afloat in national politics, and to end his life as a brilliant official, also ensuring the prestige of the family thanks to his three children, who were all destined to become excellent public officials. A talented poet and versifier, he was also heralded in China, apart from the sporadic attribution of the *Sui-jōn*, he is also considered the author of the *Kogūm-nok* 古今錄 (Ancient and modern Chronicles), a work of history in ten books which is now lost, and, in collaboration with Kim Kūn 金覲, of the literary anthology *Sohwa-jip* 小華集 (Miscellany of Little China)<sup>29</sup>, published in China. Moreover, in addition to being an excellent literatus, he also lived in an epoch (the 11th century) which was absolutely compatible not only with the events narrated in *Sui-jōn*, but also with the literary genre of fantastical tales, to which *Sui-jōn* belongs, which in Koryō was catching on as an element of *p'aegwan* 稗官 literature.

The fantastical episodes which today are certainly attributable to *Sui-jōn*, by the same admission of the texts that report them, are twelve in number, and are found scattered in various works, datable between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Some episodes explicitly assigned to *Sui-jōn* are reportedly practically identical, with only slight variations (sometimes in summary form), in more than one work.

We also have a series of stories with characters and contents equal or similar to those of the *Sui-jōn*, but which are never explicitly referred to in this work. These stories are gathered, in modern Korean texts, under the name of *kwallyōn munhōn* 關聯文獻, or ‘related bibliography (with the *Sui-jōn*)’. In these texts, the episodes present in the *Sui-jōn* are sometimes developed and treated in a more novel-like way, and for this reason one wonders if this derives from a free reinterpretation of those who report the stories or simply from the use of a different source unknown to us (perhaps a source that had already drawn from the *Sui-jōn* itself).

Finally, it cannot be excluded that, in the mass of more or less fantastic tales not connected with the characters of the *Sui-jōn* and handed down by the great

<sup>28</sup> Better known as Yalu.

<sup>29</sup> The ‘Little China’ is, of course, Korea.

collections of popular literature, especially those of the *yadam* 野談 of the late Chosŏn period (1600–1910), there are also stories that, although devoid of any explicit reference, had originally been reported by the *Sui-jŏn*. We may never know this, but the fact that references to the *Sui-jŏn* cease almost entirely from the 17th century onwards must suggest that, already in that epoch, this book had not been in circulation from a long time. On the other hand, only conjectures can be made about the date of the disappearance of the work: if Iryŏn 一然 in the episode of Wŏngwang 圓光 explicitly refers to a preserved copy of the *Sui-jŏn* in Kyŏngju 慶州, we must think that, at least until the end of the 13th century, it was still accessible. The eventful vicissitudes of the country between the 14th and the 15th centuries, culminating in the passing of the dynasty and capable of leading to the disappearance of a large part of the written culture of Koryŏ (and even more so than that before Koryŏ), could therefore be fatal results for a work that, due to its inevitable esoteric/Buddhist contents, it would hardly have found easy ground in the Confucian moralism/rationalism, which formed the intellectual basis for the establishment of the new royal lineage. The censorship exercised on the *Koryŏ sog'yo* 高麗俗謠 is very significant in this respect. On the other hand, the fact that all subsequent bibliographies contain only twelve episodes certainly attributed to the *Sui-jŏn* (of a content that must have been enormously superior), would lead us to think that most of the work must have already been lost not long after its realisation. In any case, the surviving fragments of the work continued to be reported until the 17th century.

We can thus sketch a summary scheme on the chronology of the texts where episodes certainly present in the *Sui-jŏn* appear, giving, in order, the title of the story, the work (or works) where it is reported, with the relative dating, and the way the original work is mentioned:

<i>Ado</i> 阿道	<i>Haedong kosŭng-jŏn</i> , I (13th cent.)	<i>Pak Illyang Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Wŏngwang</i> 圓光	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , IV (13th cent.)	<i>Kobon Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Pogae</i> 寶開	<i>T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae</i> , XX (15th cent.)	<i>Silla Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn</i> 崔致遠	<i>T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae</i> , LXVIII (15th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.) <i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , XV (16th cent.) <sup>30</sup>	<i>Silla Sui-jŏn</i> <i>Sui-jŏn</i> <i>Silla Sui-jŏn</i>

Chigwi 志鬼	<i>T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae</i> , LXXIII (15th cent.) <i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , XX (16th cent.) <sup>31</sup> <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.)	<i>Silla Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Yŏng'ŏ and Seo</i> 迎烏細烏	<i>P'irwŏn chapki</i> , II (15th cent.)	<i>Silla Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>T'arhae</i> 脫解	<i>Samguksa chŏr'yo</i> , II (15th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Sŏndŏk wang</i> 善德王 (Queen Sŏndŏk)	<i>Samguksa chŏr'yo</i> , VIII (15th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , I (17th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Susap sŏngnam</i> 首挿石 栴 (The camphor twig in the hair)	<i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , VIII (16th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Chukt'ong minyŏ</i> 竹筒美 女 (The beautiful women in the bamboo box)	<i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , IX (16th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Noong hwagu</i> 老翁化狗 (The old man who turned into a dog)	<i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , XII (16th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>
<i>Howŏn</i> 虎願 (Hope of a tigress)	<i>Taedong unbugunok</i> , XV (16th cent.) <i>Haedong chamnok</i> , IV (17th cent.)	<i>Sui-jŏn</i>  <i>Sui-jŏn</i>

I will now proffer a list of the titles of the stories connected, in account of their protagonists and circumstances, with those of the *Sui-jŏn*, but not explicitly attributed to it, and generally defined as *kwallyŏn munhŏn*. In this regard, it must be said that the list of episodes classified as 'related bibliography' varies at the discretion of philologists. Among these, for example, there are also those who consider 'Bibliography pertinent to the *Sui-jŏn*' not only the episode of

<sup>30</sup> In this case the episode is titled *Sŏnnyŏ hongdae* 仙女紅袋 (The red handbags of the nymphs) and is an abstract of the version reported in the *T'aep'yŏng t'ongjae*.

<sup>31</sup> Here the title is *Simhwa yot'ap* 心火繞塔 (The heart's fire that spread to the pagoda).

*Poyang and the pear tree* of the *Samguk yusa*, but also a very short quotation from Sō Kōjōng 徐居正 (1420–1488) and even (since it is very similar in the argument to Chigwi’s story), a non-Korean tale that certainly predates the writing of *Sui-jōn*.<sup>32</sup>

<i>Ado-jōn</i> 阿道傳 (Biography of Ado)	<i>Haedong kosūng-jōn</i> , I
<i>Ado kira</i> 阿道基羅 (Ado establishes Buddhism at Silla)	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , III
<i>Wōngwang-jōn</i> 圓光傳 (Biography of Wōngwang)	<i>Haedong kosūng-jōn</i> , II
<i>Wōngwang sōhak</i> 圓光西學 (The studies of Wōngwang in the West)	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , IV
<i>Minjangsa</i> 敏藏寺 (The Minjang temple) <sup>33</sup>	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , III
<i>Hūkp’ung ch’wigi sōnbang</i> 黑風吹其船舫 (The black wind hits the ship) <sup>34</sup>	<i>Pōphwa yōnghōm-jōn</i> , II, 14
<i>T’arhae</i> 脫解 (T’arhae)	<i>Samguk sagi</i> , I <sup>35</sup>
<i>T’arhae wang</i> 脫解王 (King T’arhae)	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , I
<i>Sōk T’arhae</i> 昔脫解 (Sōk T’arhae)	<i>Samguksa chōr’yo</i> , II
<i>Sōndōk wang chigi samsa</i> 善德王知幾三事 (Three Acts of Clairvoyance by Queen Sōndōk)	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , I

<sup>32</sup> *Sui-jōn* 2018: 114 and 264. Here, the editor Yi Taehyōng inserts, among the *kwallyōn munhōn*, the tale of *Sulp’aga* 術波伽, reported in book 14 of the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā), a Buddhist treatise translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva कुमारजीव (344–413) from an original text in Sanskrit today lost. It is thus a work that surely precedes the *Sui-jōn*. The brief quote by Sō Kōjōng (in any case important, as it is not found in the other fragments) is reported in the book 2 of his *Saga munjip* (Collection of writings of Saga) and says: 新羅殊異傳 所記 第一 毘婆尸佛始創 羅代九聖人住處者也 (According to the *Silla Sui-jōn*, that is the place where the Buddha Vipaśyin विपश्यन् stayed first, and in the Silla period nine saints stayed too).

<sup>33</sup> It is exactly the episode of Pogae.

<sup>34</sup> It is always the episode of Pogae, enriched with some details, according to which King Kyōngdōk 景德 would have made devotional visits to the Minjang temple every year on the eighth day of the fourth month and Pogae and Changch’un would have enjoyed special honors by having a precious copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* made and organizing meetings among the faithful. The author of the *Pōphwa yōnghōm-jōn*, however, does not quote the *Sui-jōn* among his sources, but the *Chronicles of the Minjang temple* (*Minjangsa-gi* 敏藏寺記), the *Old chronicles of Kyerim* (*Kyerim kogi* 鷄林古記), and the *Biographical catalogue of Korea’s Pōphwa School* (*Haedong Pōphwa chōnhongnok* 海東法華傳弘錄). All these works are now lost.

<sup>35</sup> The *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 reports the life of T’arhae in its first book, in the section dedicated

Kim Hyŏn kamho 金現感虎 (Kim Hyŏn moves a tigress) <sup>36</sup>	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , V
<i>Yŏnorang Seonyŏ</i> 延鳥郎細烏女 (Yŏno e Seo)	<i>Samguk yusa</i> , I
<i>Shuangnŭ fen</i> ( <i>Ssangnyŏ pun</i> ) 雙女墳 ( <i>The tombs of two women</i> )	<i>Liuchao shiji bianlei</i> , II

In conclusion, the only certain thing is that the last word on the genesis of the *Sui-jŏn* is far from having been written. A mysterious and multifaceted work, apparently with serious internal contradictions (if we are to consider the very different length and literary level of the various anecdotes as a particularity present since its first draft), it still manages to give a reasonable idea of the enormous folkloric heritage which must have existed in the kingdom of Silla. The fact that numerous works of the following periods have drawn inspiration and narrative material from the *Sui-jŏn* suggests how much the anecdotal literature of Korea (but, I dare to say, all the fantastic literature of the Far East) owes to this work.

### 3. Themes and symbols of the *Sui-jŏn*: some hints for a comparative/structuralist analysis

The stories of the *Sui-jŏn* sometimes bring back real characters such as Queen Sŏndŏk and Kim Yusin, but often the protagonists of the stories are overwhelmed and obscured by the supernatural element, which is certainly predominant. In fact, the *Sui-jŏn* is above all a forest of symbols and speaks by symbols, and since it is the oldest text of fantastic literature that has come down to us, albeit partially, it becomes the archetype, the point of reference and the touchstone of all subsequent Korean symbology.

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to the main testimonies on Silla (*Silla pon'gi* 新羅本紀). However, a part of modern Korean scholarship does not consider this episode related to the *Sui-jŏn* and instead promotes the tale *Poyang imok* 寶壤梨木 (Poyang and the pear tree), an extremely confusing story reported in *Samguk yusa*: book 4, where the deeds of the not better known monk Poyang intersect at one point with the figure of Wŏngwang, who actually lived at least three hundred years earlier. Poyang, in fact, lives between Silla and Koryŏ, but the misunderstanding of some modern philologists is mainly based on what Iryŏn wrote at the end of the episode: ‘...後人改作新羅異傳, 濫記鵲塔璃日之事于圓光傳中, 系犬城事於毗盧傳, 既謬矣’. (...Later, those who corrected the *Silla i-jŏn* quite arbitrarily inserted the stories relating to the Magpie Pagoda and the Imok snake in the biography of Wŏngwang. Likewise, they mistakenly added the material concerning the Dog Fortress to the biography of Pihŏ.). The simple quotation of the *Sui-jŏn* (assuming that it really is) should not authorize any inferences regarding the relationship with the Poyang episode, also because the contents of the latter are quite different from the biography of Wŏngwang as we know it, and they refer to a very late period, even later than the Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn adventure itself.

<sup>36</sup> It corresponds to the episode ‘Hope of a Tigress’.

Although far-eastern fantastic literature is mostly linked to Buddhism, still *Sui-jŏn* presents, among others, stories more properly linked to the indigenous cultural substratum. None of the stories, however, escape the structuralist principle, according to which, in the face of the same situation, man tends to react in the same way, albeit in different forms and modalities according to the various cultures.<sup>37</sup>

We will now analyse some elements, present in the various texts, deeply linked (in many cases still today) to the world of symbology in Korea and the Far East in the context, however, of a ‘deep brain structure’ common to all cultures of the world.

### Wind

Present and active in the episodes of Pogae 寶開 and ‘The beautiful women in the bamboo box’, the wind boasts a remarkable symbolism in the oriental world and in Korea.

Among the three hundred and sixty followers who accompanied Hwanung 桓雄 on earth there was also the lord of the wind. In Korean folklore we still find the figure of the *Yŏngdŭng halmi* 靈登할미 literally ‘old woman of the ascension of the spirit’ who descends to Earth at the beginning of the second lunar month (a particularly windy period) and returns to heaven after twenty days, after having been the object of veneration and sacrifices to ask for a good year.<sup>38</sup> It is also believed that if there is rain at the time of its descent, then it will be a lucky year, while if there is wind it will be a negative year.

The wind is thus a personified manifestation of nature, capable of dispensing both good and evil at the same time, a primordial element whose sinogram takes on various meanings and which appears in numerous Korean words of Chinese origin, such as *p’ungsu* 風水 (geomancy), *p’ungsok* 風俗 (habits,

<sup>37</sup> In few words, it is the difference between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. The common response to the same phenomenon, thus, is the ‘nature’ that resides in the deep structure of the human brain, in that part that structuralist philosophers call ‘reptilian brain’. The latter, in a more properly medical habit also called ‘triune brain’ (or R-complex), is the anatomically most archaic part of the brain that presides over primordial instincts such as, for example, the territorial, sexual, and hierarchical ones. The external differentiation with which the response is activated, on the other hand, belongs to the ‘structured’ brain, which houses the cultural superstructures and therefore the ‘culture’ itself. On this question see, among others, LABORIT 1971: 55–80, and, in the more specifically psychiatric field, MACLEAN 1990: 15–16, 243–244, 519.

<sup>38</sup> The ‘Yŏngdŭng halmi’ is probably to be identified with the god of the wind called ‘Yŏngdŭng sin 靈登神’ in the *Tongguk sesigi* 東國歲時記. The ‘Yŏngdŭng halmi’ itself, then, forms, with the ‘Mul halmi 물 할미’ (Old woman of the water) and ‘San halmi 산 할미’ (Old woman of the mountain), the trio of ‘Old aunts 老姑’.

customs), *p'ungmo* 風貌 (appearance), *p'unggyōng* 風景 (view, panorama), but also *chungp'ung* 中風 (paralysis of the body).

In Buddhism, humans are clouds and the wind is the karma that drives them. The wind as a 'driver of the soul' is also often associated with Taoism and, at a lower level, with eroticism and debauchery: expressions such as 'param nada 바람 나다', 'param tūlda 바람 들다', 'param p'iuda 바람 피우다' mean 'betraying conjugal fidelity', 'abandoning oneself to carnal pleasures', while the noun 'paramdungi 바람둥이' indicates the dissolute person, one who is dedicated to libertinage. Not surprisingly, in a famous Korean classic novel that tells of the tragicomic misadventures of a libertine, the name of the protagonist is Ch'unp'ung 春風, or 'spring wind'. A libertine may also have been Pogae's son (whose name is Changch'un 長春 or 'Long Spring') and therefore the black wind encountered by the ship also becomes the symbol of his depravity.

Precisely for this reason, the wind may well be an obscurantist element capable of concealing, thanks to the raised dust, the right path to the human being, thus leading to the perdition of the body and soul. In the episode of Pogae, which is in fact a hymn to the Buddhist faith, the 'black wind' encountered by the ship in which Pogae's son sails symbolises a Dantean 'dark forest' in which the protagonist loses his way (which is above all the path of righteousness), only to later find it thanks to an imperishable memory of his mother and the holiness of a monk capable of rewarding the memory of that sentiment capable of rising above any possible deviance. In the episode of the beautiful women in the bamboo box, however, the wind becomes a magical instrument, probably evoked, capable of placing an impenetrable curtain between the common mortal (even if he is a hero like Kim Yusin 金庾信) and the sphere of the incomprehensible, the secret accessible only to initiates. Here, in fact, the wind is once again linked to the world of the unfathomable and the arcane.

## Sea

Present in various episodes of *Sui-jōn*, the sea immediately appears for what it is: something that unites and divides, a place of escape and a treacherous trap. From Gilgamesh to Odysseus, from Saint Brendan to Gulliver, sea is a mobile element between two safe points of the mainland and crossing it often generates transformation, atonement and redemption.

In Korean folklore, sea plays a major role.<sup>39</sup> It is the abode of the dragon-god (or dragon-king) of the abyss who also demands human sacrifices, as

<sup>39</sup> In the multicultural society of Silla, sea was a true 'protagonist', as rightly underlined by Sō Ch'ōrwōn 2012: 80–101.

clearly reflected in the story of Sim Ch'ōng 沈淸, a literary and theatrical masterpiece (it is one of the most famous *p'ansori* 판소리 *madang*) exalting the filial devotion of the protagonist who agrees to be sacrificed to the sea in order to restore sight to the old blind father. Probably, history hides the memory of a remote antiquity, when human sacrifices were actually practiced on the Korean peninsula, but sacrifices are made to the dragon-god to this day. In the case of the island of Cheju 濟州, shamanic rites are celebrated in honor of the dragon-god and his 44,000 followers in order to console the souls of the dead at sea and promote a good fishing season.

Various taboos are linked to the sea: those who do business on the sea usually do not breed dogs or eat dog meat. Women are not allowed in the rites celebrated inside boats or ships and wishing a good trip and a good return to sailors (and fishermen in particular) brings bad luck. On the other hand, Korean Buddhism contemplates the figure of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara of the sea (Haesu Kwanūm 海水觀音), particularly venerated in the Naksan 洛山 temple erected in what is considered his place of origin, near the coast of the East Sea. The Bodhisattva Kwanūm 觀音 (Chinese: Guanyin; Japanese: Kwannon) is the one who pays attention to the pains of the world and the association with the sea symbolises the extension of his magnanimity also to the kingdom of water. In this way, the Korean abode of the Bodhisattva of the sea becomes the equivalent of Mount Potalaka पोतलक, the abode of Avalokiteśvara in the south Indian sea.

In the episode of Pogae the sea represents the harshness of life, the element that rages against the mortal and deludes him with his instability and volubility. Crossing the sea, therefore, is an act of penance and redemption and this will happen to the son of Pogae who seems to succumb to the force of the sea (the illusory of the senses of worldly life), but in the end he will survive and return to his mother, thanks to his redemption rewarded by the Bodhisattva Kwanūm.

In the episodes of T'arhae and the spouses Yōng'o and Seo, the sea serves to unite the destinies of men to distant countries, perhaps echoing the numerous sea voyages that even in the protohistoric period had to take place between the Korean peninsula, the Asian continent and the Japanese archipelago. Another proof of the ambiguity of this element, capable of destroying, but also of giving birth to a new life.

### Fox

A benign protagonist of the episode of Wōngwang, this animal usually has a negative value in Korea.<sup>40</sup> Equipped with diabolical cunning and demonic

<sup>40</sup> In the episode of Wōngwang reported in *Haedong kosūng-jōn*: book 2, the fox (狐) is replaced

power, it often represents the extreme degeneration of the female sex: *If you do not beat your wife, she will become a fox* (아내를 때리지 않으면 여우가 된다), says an old proverb. Particularly feared are the ‘red foxes’ or ‘fire foxes’ (불 여우) and the old foxes (*paengnyōn yōu* 백년 여우: literally, ‘hundred year old foxes’). Even the nine-tailed foxes (*kumiho* 九尾狐), which are usually also the oldest, since the number of tails is often directly proportional to age, are sadly infamous.<sup>41</sup>

The fox is often associated with the idea of death. Its nocturnal cry predicts mourning and misfortune, as another old proverb suggests: If a fox makes its cry heard in the mountain opposite this predicts a death, but if it makes its cry heard in the mountain behind, then someone will die (앞산에서 여우가 울면 흉년이 들어오고 뒷산에서 여우가 울면 사람이 죽는다). In the second hypothesis, the worst, the misfortune would happen inside the village, while in the first case the news of a mourning from another area would arrive. The fox, therefore, became a true god of the underworld, capable of heralding the end of a person and accompanying him on his journey to the afterlife.

According to popular belief, the fox is an unclean animal, even capable of profaning a grave to feed on the corpses contained therein. Then, if a fox manages to wear a human skull, it will be able to transform itself into what it wants, thus increasing its own danger.<sup>42</sup>

But then, how come in the text of *Sui-jōn* does the fox reveal himself as a positive spirit able to help the Buddhist Master find his way? I would say that, first of all, the very attitude of Buddhism towards animals differs somewhat from that expressed by local tradition. We can therefore already glimpse an affirmation of the ‘superiority’ of Buddhist civilisation and therefore of its right to conquer philosophical and religious primacy at the expense of previous cults, which also implies the justification of the political power in office which was inspired by Buddhism. The fox, an evil symbol of primordial intellectual darkness, but also a creature subject to its karma, recognises, certainly behind a divine inspiration that comes from Heaven itself, the holiness of Master Wōngwang and becomes an instrument of his religious and political success. It is therefore an act of submission of the uncontrolled primitive forces to the new creed and new values that make up the official ideology of the country (in fact the disturbing monk, a neighbor of Wōngwang, is ruthlessly annihilated)

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by the leopard cat (狸: *Prionailurus bengalensis*. In pure Korean *salk* 살 or *salk'oengi* 살쟁이), also a quick-change animal and part of ancient Far Eastern folklore.

<sup>41</sup> However, there are some differences in the perception of the fox in the Far East: on the question see KIM Honggyōm 2011: 50–59.

<sup>42</sup> More details are found in PAK and YU 2010.

and they reaffirm its identification as a blessed land belonging to the Maitreya. A further meeting point, therefore, in the infinite relationship between religion and politics common to every culture in the world.

### Fire

An incredible primal force revered (and worshipped) in many cultures and religions, the fire that devours Chigwi is undoubtedly one of the major elements of discussion. A symbol of life and luck, fire is a vivifying, purifying, and creative element, but also deadly and destructive, capable of periodically raging in the fields and inhabited centres whose houses were mostly built of wood.<sup>43</sup> By means of her exorcism, Queen Söndök symbolically confines him to a remote place, preventing him from returning. But since fire also symbolises uncontrolled sentiment, wild passion, the destructive forces of the darkest part of the irrational, the Queen's act becomes one of appropriation and control, of moderation and justice towards the nation. A variant of the Chigwi's episode, reported in the *Samguk yusa*, narrates that the fire generated by a man expands to attack the pagoda of the temple, symbolically threatening the official Silla religion itself and a return to the 'darkness' of pre-Buddhist civilisation. For this reason, the act of the Queen, the highest representative and guarantor of national faith and identity, is even more sacred and justified.<sup>44</sup>

Dominating fire, therefore, is the prerogative of kings (royal diadems of the Three Kingdoms indisputably show flame motifs), but also of blacksmiths, men almost sacred, venerated and feared in the same way as shamans. The King, or that which represents him, can give fire but he can also perish of it: in the 'Song of the Turtle' (*Kuji-ga* 龜旨歌), which represents an authentic request for the coming of a sovereign, the animal is threatened to be roasted and eaten if he is unable to fulfill the wishes of the assembled tribes.

But the story of fire is much older. If in Greek mythology fire is given to men by Prometheus, in Korea it is Puso 夫蘇, the third son of Tan'gun 檀君,

<sup>43</sup> The Korean term 'pul 불' connected with the idea of 'fire' and 'light', probably derives from a root \*p/b-r/l, at the basis of many Indoeuropean words, within that possible proto-boreal linguistic *koiné* which is being investigated today by various researchers (see, for example, PALIGA 2007: 13–30). From the Proto-Indoeuropean root \*b<sup>h</sup>renw, therefore, we have the Indian divine being 'Puruṣa' more or less meaning 'someone who has burnt up the evil of external contact'. This same root is also found in the ancient Greek πῦρ, and today it is traceable in English 'burn' (through Old English \*birnan), in Italian 'bruciare' and 'braciare' (through Gothic \*brasa), in French 'brûler' (perhaps from Germanic \*brōjan), etc.

<sup>44</sup> Ōm Kiyōng (2007: especially 31–36) finds a link between the tale of Chigwi and the fires that struck the Yōngmyo 靈妙 temple (frequently visited by Queen Söndök) between 662 and 669. On the symbolism of this tale also see YU Kyōnghwan 1998, and RIOTTO 2017: 130–131.

who invented it.<sup>45</sup> Once passed to humans, the fire becomes both a threat and the soul of the house, representing a perennial danger but also giving heat and cooking food. In some areas of Korea, such as the Yangsan 梁山 area, in southern Kyōngsang 慶尙南道, fire is often associated with a domestic female deity familiarly called *Chowang halmi* 竈王 할미 or ‘Grandma Chowang’, to whom simple offerings on the kitchen hob are done. Therefore, in this occasion the kitchen hob becomes an authentic altar impregnated with the *sōnghwa* 聖火, or ‘sacred fire’. *Chowang halmi* is usually asked, rubbing her hands to emphasise the invocation, the protection of the house and its inhabitants.<sup>46</sup>

Preserving the ‘seed’ of fire so as not to have to rekindle it somewhere else was, in Korean homes as in any other house of antiquity, an almost absolute priority. In the case of a move, the embers also had to be transported to the new home: giving up it would have meant, in fact, also giving up good luck. In the rites for the ancestors, the fire of the candles with which the sacrificial paper (*soji* 燒紙) with the name of the deceased is burned represents, in its vital force, a point of union between Heaven and Earth, the world and the beyond, the ancestors and their descendants.

Terrible and evil if unchecked, fire is nevertheless capable of keeping misfortune at bay if managed well. On the occasion of the first full moon of the lunar year (*taeborimnal* 대보름날), huge bundles of straw and various tree branches light up in Korea, expressing hopes and desires. Similar customs are also widespread in various parts of the residual world of ancient propitiatory rites for the new year.

A symbolic curtain of fire, made of small torches, had to be passed through by the Korean bride in ancient times when she reached her home as a married woman. In fact, it was believed that the fire would block any evil entity that by chance dared to attack or follow the woman.

Fire is connected to Buddhism as an essential component of funeral rites. The cremation (*hwajang* 火葬), in fact, begins in Korea only in the period of the Three Kingdoms, precisely following the introduction of Buddhism,

<sup>45</sup> See ANONYMOUS 1992: 371–372. On Tan’gun’s offspring see O Kangwŏn 2015.

<sup>46</sup> In Chinese, the pronunciation of the character 火 (fire) is similar to that of 活 (life) and therefore, every New Year, people invite, by lighting fires, the spirits of wealth, but also of longevity. Japan, given the many volcanoes in its territory, can only have a particular relationship with fire. The creative goddess Izanami-no Mikoto 伊邪那美命 goes to her underworld after having given birth to Kagutsuchi 迦具土 (also called Homasubi 火産靈), god of fire, in a myth that perhaps alludes to the overthrow of an ancient matriarchy. In this regard, Mount Fuji itself 富士 seems perhaps to owe its name to Huchi, the ancient fire deity of the Ainu, even if such a hypothesis is still highly debated.

a religion of Indian (and therefore Indo-European) origin. Buddhist iconography, too, will show the halo of fire relative to heroism and holiness in the images of the Enlightened One, and which is no other than the Iranian *pharn*, which will also influence Western religious art and which still remains today in names of Iranian origin such as Caspar, linguistic outcome of Gathaspar ← Gondophares/Vindapharna.

### Sun and Moon

In the episode of Yōng’o 迎烏 (Yōn’o 延烏 in the *Samguk yusa*) and Seo 細烏, the two spouses are clearly two supernatural beings and the very emanations, respectively, of the sun and the moon. Korean mythology has numerous connections with the sun: Haemosu 解慕漱, founder of the northern Puyō State and father of Chumong 朱蒙, founder of Koguryō, is the son of the Ruler of Heaven. He travels in a chariot drawn by five dragons (*oryonggō* 五龍車), wears a raven feather crown (*ougwan* 烏羽冠) and girds the ‘sword of the shining dragon’ (*yonggwanggōm* 龍光劍) beside him. All these attributes are linked to the solar symbolism, but Haemosu also used to be among men only during the day, while the night returns to the Celestial Palace, a habit that makes himself a sun that, setting and rising, marks the time of life on the Land.

The founder of Silla, Pak Hyōkkōse, presents himself as a divine infant radiating light, and from this very characteristic he takes the name: ‘Hyōkkōse 赫居世’, in fact, is a contracted form for ‘Kwangmyōng ise 光明理世’, that is ‘Light and splendor that rules the world’.

The myth of Hyōkkōse, which is born from an egg, is easily traceable in East Asia and its connection with solar cults is also demonstrated by a linguistic analysis.<sup>47</sup> The pure Korean term ‘al’ (egg 알), in fact, is surely connected with the Mongol word ‘üre’ (seed) and then with the generative strength of the sun. In the ancient language, ‘al’ also indicates the sun, as today proven by expressions such as ‘sahül’ (three days) and ‘nahül’ (four days), which are old transpositions of 三日 and 四日, where the character of ‘sun’ is transliterated ‘ül’, the equivalent of ‘al’. In this regard, the word ‘ach’im’ (morning 아침) derives from a primitive ‘at’ 알 or ‘al’ (sun) and the nominalisation of the verb ‘ch’ida’ 차다, the latter of which carries the meaning of ‘to raise’ or ‘to illuminate’. The substantial identity between sun and egg might have led to the birth from eggs as an effect of the solar fecundation, as in the case of Yuhwa 柳花, mother of Chumong 朱蒙, the founder of Koguryō.

<sup>47</sup> On the etymologies provided here see, among others, Sō Chōngbōm 2000 and ANONYMOUS 1992.

Being the very essence of *yang*, the sun represents the sons, the sovereign, the father or the husband. And as the sun is one, so is the father, the sovereign, the husband. An eclipse of the sun indicates the loss of power of a sovereign. Indeed, the concept of sun/light associated with Korean kings is traceable in other cases.<sup>48</sup>

Dreaming of the sun shining high in the sky is a good omen, especially with regard to work, just as seeing the first sun brings good luck. Even now, on the last evening of the year, many Koreans flock to the easternmost areas of the country in order to greet the first dawn of the new year. Also in the art of dream interpretation (*haemong* 解夢), then, dreaming of the sun and the moon bursting into the room will indicate the birth of a son who will become illustrious. Conversely, dreaming of the fall of the sun and the moon will be a harbinger of grave concern for parents.

If Yōng'o is the sun, then Seo is the moon.<sup>49</sup> The pure Korean term for 'moon' (or 'month', since one 'moon' corresponds to one month) is 'tal 달'. In more ancient times, however, the word 'porūm 보름' existed as a synonym for 'tal', and the two terms are found together today in the expression 'porūm tal 보름 달', meaning 'full moon'. As for the etymology, the term 'porūm' is formed by a root 'pol-' ('por-') connected with 'biya' or 'pa' (ba), which is an identifying root of 'moon' in the Manchu/Tungus peoples. In this way, the modern expression 'porūm tal' (Manchurian: 'biyatari (Chinese: 每月)' in the sense of 'every month') literally means 'double moon', or 'the moon of moons', the 'moon par excellence', indicating our satellite in the fullness of its dimensions and its brilliance. After all, joining two words of the same meaning (even of different languages) to obtain one of increased meaning is not, in linguistics, a rare phenomenon: just think, in Sicily, of Mount Etna, called by the locals 'Mongibello'. In this case, the hybrid term that combines the Latin 'mons' and the Arabic 'ġabal (ġebel جب)' indicates the majesty of Etna, the 'mountain par excellence'. Regarding 'tal', however, the etymology is more uncertain: the term is the homophone of a root that in ancient Korean was connected with the concept of 'height' and is still recognisable, for example, in the verb *talda* 달다 (to hang) and in the substantive *tarak* 다락 (tower). An alleged noun \**tah-* (\*다ㅎ-) was also hypothesised as the origin of the term, which later evolved into 'tal' and originally meant 'other land', 'other world'.

<sup>48</sup> King Pich'ō 毗處 of Silla, better known as Soji 炤知, reigned from 479 to 500. It is very likely that 'Pich'ō' is the indigenous name of the sovereign, being connected with the pure Korean 'pit 빛' which is a term related to light and to the splendor, whereas 'Soji' (the character So 炤 equally means 'to shine'), is the 'sinicised' counterpart, while maintaining the same meaning.

<sup>49</sup> Yu Yungnye 2020: 1799–1802 identifies in the sun and the moon the very origin of a civilisation transplanted from the Korean peninsula to Japan. On the question also see KIM Kangsan 2011.

In a lunar calendar such as the traditional one in Korea, the moon can only have a primary importance in determining recurrences, sacred and profane times. The recurrence of the Ch'usök 秋夕,<sup>50</sup> which falls on the full moon of the fifteenth day of the eighth month (and therefore around the autumn equinox), is an ancient harvest festival various religious and philosophical experiences have gradually been stratified, such as the Confucian one, which ended up associating it with the cult of the dead and ancestors.<sup>51</sup> The first full moon of the year (*chōngwōl tae porūm* 正月 대보름), then, is a very heartfelt event in which protective totems<sup>52</sup> are erected in the villages and Heaven is asked for health and prosperity throughout the year.

Typically associated with the sphere of *yin*, the moon indicates immobility, passivity, coldness and, as in many other cultures, feminine nature. Later cultural stratifications also place as a blessed rabbit<sup>53</sup> and a magical cinnamon tree.

In the eyes of men, the moon changes continuously, enlarging and shrinking, and for this eternal mutability it symbolises the various cases of life: prosperity and ruin, success and fall (*hūngmang sōngsoe* 興亡盛衰). For this reason, it also symbolises eternity and rebirth, associating with all those animals that fall into hibernation in winter to return to active life in spring. For this reason, the moon also plays a part in divination, as in the case of the so-called 'Method of observation of the Pleiades (*chomsaengi pogi* 줍생이 보기)' in which the position and distance between the moon and these stars, at the beginning of the

<sup>50</sup> Also said *Han'gawi* 한가위.

<sup>51</sup> In ancient times, the offerings following the harvest were probably addressed above all to the gods. This festival seems to have originated in Silla, where it was called *kabae* 가배 and on the occasion of which, for the duration of a month, a weaving competition was held between two teams, at the end of which the defeated side was required to invite the winner. There is also another hypothesis for which this festival would have been proclaimed instead after a great victory by Silla over Paekche 百濟.

<sup>52</sup> They are the *sottae* 솟대, whose use, however, is not limited to Korea. Other Tungusic people like the Evenki use them but with different meanings: while in Korea the ducks that are on top of the poles protect the villages from air, land and water disasters (the ducks, in fact, in addition to walking are also skilled in swimming and flying), the figures on poles of the Evenki poles symbolise the return of the birds from their migration at the end of winter, which renews the spiritual strength of the shamans that had weakened during the cold season. On Evenki (and Siberian) Shamanism see HAMAYON 1990.

<sup>53</sup> According to the *Śasajātaka* शशजातक, in one of his former lives the Buddha was a rabbit who voluntarily jumped on the fire offering himself as food for a poor man (see Jātaka n. 316 in COWELL ed. 1957: 34–37). For this reason, the poor man who actually was the god Śakra शक्र, daubed the sign of a hare in the orb of the moon. In the Far East the myth has been revisited in various ways: in China the rabbit becomes the keeper of the cinnamon tree, grinding the bark to prepare the elixirs of immortality, while in China and Korea it produces rice cakes.

second month, they predict the positive or negative developments of the year. In addition, due to its influence on the tides, the moon becomes a symbol of cosmic force, capable of managing the natural elements on Earth at will.

Due to its suffused and soft light, the moon inspires purity and harmony, and on account of its coldness and position in the night it inspires loneliness and sadness. Its eternity stimulates regret in transient beings, who use it as a unit of time (as in the case of menstruation) for the flow of life itself.

Finally, the moon also symbolises the Queen. In the case of Seo, the moon is a celestial body that has changed position, but which nevertheless remains under the same sky and above man. The move to Japan, thus, probably alludes to a political change that took place in Silla (or in a neighboring state) at the very beginning of its existence.<sup>54</sup>

### Egg

The episode of T'arhae is undoubtedly one of the richest in symbology; it would be appropriate to say, *ab ovo*.

In many parts of the world, the egg is associated with fertility, abundance, rebirth or resurrection. In Korea, however, we find the egg at the basis of many myths of origin, given the stories about the birth of the eponyms of the kingdoms that would have started the history of the country. In fact, the founders of Koguryō 高句麗, Silla and Kaya 伽倻 are born from eggs; if we consider Paekche a collateral branch of Koguryō, having both states originated from the old kingdom of Puyō 夫餘 in Manchuria, then we see that practically all the Korean kingdoms (and therefore the history of Korea itself) are born from eggs. In fact, there is apparently a clear split between the prehistoric age, dominated by figures of celestial origin such as Tan'gun, and the proto-historical age, more linked to myths of Earth. Eggs, as a proposal for rebirth or resurrection, could be symbolised by those jar-burials (*onggwanmyo* 甕棺墓) very common in the south of the Korean peninsula from the 3rd–2nd century BCE to the 5th century CE.

The pure Korean term for 'egg', as a general concept, is 'al 알', a word now also used to indicate objects such as marbles or pawns in board games

<sup>54</sup> CHŌN Suyōn 2018 sees, at the basis of Yōn'ŏ and Seo's migration, political and economic reasons. In particular, the population of what is today 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 reported in *Sui-jōn*. A possible change in rituals (as a consequence of a new political order) is hypothesised by KIM Yōngjun 2019.

such as *paduk* 바둑. Chicken eggs, due to their great use, have specific names: together with the pure Korean ‘talgyal 달걀’, the result of the meeting of the Korean words ‘talk 닭’ (chicken) and, in fact, ‘al 알’ (egg), we also have the Sino-Korean ‘kyeran 鷄卵’.

The rattles of the shamans, which with their shape resemble eggs, become vehicles of life when they help the officiant of the rite to transmit the message of the dead called ‘kongsu 공수’. And precisely life is the idea that is most associated with the egg, starting from the concept of ‘cosmic egg 宇宙卵’ from which, according to the Chinese, the god Pangu 盤古 would come out to separate Heaven and Earth from Chaos. As a matter of fact, egg symbolises the primal androgynous entity from which the masculine nature and the feminine nature are extracted. This presupposes (at least theoretically) a primitive parity of vital force capable of balancing itself as in *yin-yang* 陰陽, which in the West is already theorised by in the ancient philosophical doctrines such as Hermeticism. In this regard, Pangu 盤古’s ‘cosmic egg’ of Chinese mythology and the ‘philosophical egg’ of the Hermetic tradition may have had a common matrix to be searched, in all probability, between ancient Mesopotamia and India. Even more likely, the Chinese myth of Pangu derives from western models: it is true, in fact, that Pangu separates the *Yang* and the *Yin* from the hermaphroditic/genderless cosmic egg/chaos by means of an axe, but it is also true that the figure of Pangu does not belong to traditional Chinese folklore, as it very probably arrived in China together with Buddhism at the time of the later Han. Pangu himself, therefore, could have assumed the role of the Indian Puruṣa पुरुष, a term whose semantics is very complicated but is essentially associated with the concept of ‘cosmic man’, ‘soul’ (in the sense of ‘Holy Spirit’ or ‘Logos’) and ‘Supreme Being’. In any case it is an entity whose creative power is put into practice through self-sacrifice: in this way, the parts of Pangu’s body became the primary elements of Earth, whereas Puruṣa, the ‘cosmic man’, sacrifices a part of himself to give rise to mankind and the Universe.<sup>55</sup> After the division of primitive genderless/androgyny in many cases a character emerges as a progenitor. If Yuhwa is the ancestor of Koguryō, Nūwa 女媧 creates mankind and she has her divine colleague/*alter ego* in the Xiwangmu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West, whose peaches of immortality are reminiscent of the pomes of the Hesperides.<sup>56</sup> Women born

<sup>55</sup> In ancient Indian texts quotation of the term Puruṣa (with its many meanings) are legion. As ‘cosmic man’ see *Rgveda* ऋग्वेद, book 10.90. Also see RENDICH 2018: 188.

<sup>56</sup> It is interesting to note, in this regard, that both the Xiwangmu peach garden and the Hesperides’ Garden are located in the far west of the cultural areas that ‘created’ them. This identification with the West starts from the very names: the character ‘xi’ 西 means ‘west’, and ‘Hesperides’ derives from the Greek ἑσπερά, meaning ‘west’ or ‘evening’, as an area where the sun sets.

from others' 'side' or 'flank' (or rib-bone, if you will) may be ancestors (Eve is the Mother of mankind), and the history of Silla/Kaya shows, according to the sources, had much to do with characters (and then cultural patterns) from other geographical places: I will only recall Kim Alchi 金闕智 (notice that the character 闕 also is in the name 'Ar'yōng 闕英') a possible descendant of Kim Ilche 金日磾,<sup>57</sup> King T'arhae 脫解, Hogong 瓠公, Ch'ōyong 處容 and Princess Hō Hwang'ok 許黃玉.

The oviparous myths of Korea must probably be framed in the more general context of Tungusic mythology,<sup>58</sup> in turn within the 'deep structure' of the perception of the egg around the world. However, it cannot be excluded that the 'cultural superstructure' for which the mythology of the egg is extended to the institutional reality of a single state (and not only to the cosmic order) could have been influenced in some way by China, which already at the end of the first millennium BCE had a complex political order and a complicated bureaucracy. What is certain is that the message of the birth of the first sovereigns from an egg, in Korea, is precisely that of establishing a moral and civil order, of separating good from evil, of founding laws against anarchy. Inside the egg all this is indiscriminately enclosed, just as it is enclosed in a kingdom that does not have a virtuous guide.<sup>59</sup> Coming out of the egg then means not only coming to life, but also defeating Chaos and ushering in the age of reason.

<sup>57</sup> From *Samguk sagi*: books 1 and 34, we know that in the year 65 King T'arhae heard the crying of a cock west of the capital. He then sent Hogong to find the origin of the cry and the latter found, hanging from the branch of a tree, a golden box, under which there was a white cock. Hogong reported the discovery to the king, and the latter open the box. Inside was a splendid child who was given the name of 'Alchi' and the surname 'Kim' as he had been found in a golden box. After growing up, Kim Alchi changed the primitive name of 'Sirim 始林' to 'Kyerim 鷄林'. However, another legend has it that Kim Alchi is closely related to the episode of Kim Ilche 金日磾 (Chinese: Jin Ridi) described, among others, in *Han shu* 漢書: book 68, and in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑: books 19–23, where the use of sacrifice to a gold statue by the Xiongnu 匈奴 is also mentioned. The statue was captured by the Chinese in 122/121 BCE. (See *Han shu*: book 55; *Shiji* 史記: books 110–111) and Kim himself (who later seems to be considered the progenitor of various personalities of Silla) is a Prince Xiongnu also captured by the Chinese who assumes this surname precisely by virtue of the sacrificial custom towards what is called the 'golden man'. According to tradition, Kim Ilche's father was precisely Hyudo 休屠 (or Hyujō), leader of the Xiongnu. On the question see RIoTTO 2009: 23–25. On the possible relation between Kim Ilche and Kim Alchi see RIoTTO 2022: 102 n. 15.

<sup>58</sup> See KIM Hwagyōng 2018, where the author decisively refutes Mishina Akihide 三品彰英's theory according to which Korea's oviparous myths had originated in south-eastern Asia.

<sup>59</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that Korea's ancient states (such as ancient Rome) has neither cosmogonic nor anthropogenic myths: the creation of the State, therefore, is the very creation of the world.

## 4. Conclusions

There is much more to say,<sup>60</sup> but doing so would greatly exceed the length parameters usually required for articles in journals. I will therefore conclude by recalling that the *Sui-jŏn* must have been, in its time, a work of vast proportions and various topics, not limited only to fantastic tales but also extended to history and mythology. Indeed, it is no mystery that the themes of Chinese *chuanqi* are also varied, even while favouring fantastic topics. This detail, largely missed until now by specialists, was to make the *Sui-jŏn* a sort of literary encyclopedia, which, not by chance, is already mentioned in various historical texts of the Koryŏ period. It is not known why only some episodes were saved and not others: in this regard, it cannot even be excluded that there are more extant fragments but that they are now ‘camouflaged’ in other works that do not mention their origin, and therefore are not identifiable and recognisable. In any case, it is certain that the *Sui-jŏn* remains an important work, in the panorama of ancient Korean literature, and should therefore deserve more attention.

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