

North Korea's Old-Joseon Education and Ethnic Nationalism: focused on history textbooks*

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I . Introduction

Historical research of North Korea's Gojoseon has gone through significant shifts over a few defining occasions since the liberation. One of these such occasions was the discovery of Dangun's tomb

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in 1993. In September 1993, North Korea announced that Dangun's tomb had been discovered at the base of Daebak Mountain in Gangdong-gun, Pyongyang-shi. Through the announcement, the North was effectively asserting that Dangun was a historical figure who indeed lived 5,000 years ago. Following the announcement, North Korea declared Dangun to be the original progenitor of the Joseon race, and began to carry out a complete overhaul of the existing historical understanding of Gojoseon.

Surely, such a move by the North Korean academia poses many issues, because it is a manipulation of history - a group's institutional memory - to use as a propaganda tool at the state's will. This new stance on Dangun·Gojoseon research after 1993 is well reflected in the regime's history education. In this paper, we will examine North Korea's Dangun·Gojoseon education with a focus on Joseon Ryoksa, North Korea's middle-school history textbook, to consider its political and social implications.

II. Depictions of and Research Trends in Dangun-Gojoseon History

Joseon Ryoksa's contents pertaining to primitive and ancient history have gone through the following changes.

1982
Chapter 1. Primitive community society Section 1. Primitive group living Section 2. Clan-based community living Section 3. Collapse of primitive community society Section 4. Primitive community society's culture

<p>Chapter 2. Slaveholder society, ancient nations</p> <p>Section 1. Founding of ancient nations</p> <p>Section 2. Development of ancient nations</p> <p>Section 3. Collapse of ancient nations</p> <p>Section 4. Cultures of ancient nations</p>
<p>1999</p>
<p>Chapter 1. Primitive community society</p> <p>Section 1. Life of homo erectus</p> <p>Section 2. Life of the ancient people</p> <p>Section 3. Life of the new people and the emergence of ancient prototypical Joseon people</p> <p>Section 4. Collapse of primitive community society</p>
<p>Chapter 2. Slaveholder society</p> <p>Section 1. Gojoseon</p> <p>Section 2. Buyeo, Guryo, and Jinglyuk</p> <p>Section 3. Ancient Joseon people's landing in Japan</p>

In 1982, Gojoseon history was presented over Sections 1-4 of Chapter 2 in the Joseon Ryoksa. These sections depict the founding, development, and collapse of Gojoseon, along with those of other ancient states including Buyeo-Samhan. In contrast, the 1999 version of Joseon Ryoksa dedicates the entirety of Section 1 to Gojoseon history, resulting in an increased volume of material covered and increased proportion to other topics in the textbook.

In fact, the 1999 version offers a more systematic and organized presentation of Gojoseon, as its founding, development, and collapse are handled in chronological order. However, the changes were not limited to how the history is presented, but also included alterations to its content.

Example A. Founding of Dangun Joseon: The first nation founded

by our race is “Joseon” (Gojoseon). Its founder was Dangun, and that is why it is also called Dangun Joseon. 1) Dangun’s birth and upbringing: Dangun was born about 5,000 years ago in Pyongyang (···) Dangun’s father was Hwan-woong. At the time of Dangun’s birth, Hwan-woong was the chief of the Bakdal tribal union. Dangun’s mother was the daughter of the chief of a neighboring tribe. Around the time Dangun was growing up, primitive society had collapsed and given way to relentless tribal wars. Dangun enjoyed practicing archery, spear work, and swordsmanship from a young age. His martial-arts skills were well known among the neighboring tribes. 2) Dangun’s founding of Gojoseon: Dangun, who had been extraordinarily bright since he was a small boy, succeeded his father to become the chief of the tribe. He maintained a good relationship with the neighboring tribes, and kept a strong hold on unity by using military force and keeping in check anyone who presented a threat to the tribe. As a result, the territory and population of the Bakdal tribe continued to expand, and its riches increased as never before. Dangun founded a nation about 5,000 years ago, named it “Joseon,” and declared Pyongyang as its capital city (···) Dangun’s tomb is in Gandong-gun, Pyongyang-shi. Dangun was buried in his birthplace, as it is our people’s tradition.

First, the description of Dangun and Gojoseon’s founding year have been changed. While the textbook published before 1993 states that Gojoseon was founded in 7/8 B.C., the textbook published after 1999 states that it was founded 5,000 years ago. Also, Dangun’s family line and achievements are described in detail, as it can be seen in example A. For instance, Dangun’s father, Hwan-woong, is described as the chief of the Bakdal tribal union and his mother as

the daughter of a neighboring tribe's chief. Where did these details originate?

At first, Ryi Sang-ho's work in the 1960s comes to mind. North Korea's Dangun-myth studies were set in motion by Ryi Sang-ho, who analyzed the myth and interpreted Hwan-woong as the chief of the Bakdal tribe and Wonng-nyo as a symbol of a bear-totem clan. Ryi's work is reflected in Joseon Jeonsa (1979), which suggests that it became the conventional interpretation. In fact, example A consistently references North Korean academia's Dangun-myth studies. Nevertheless, the details of Dangun's upbringing and achievements cannot be found in research published before 1993. For these details, North Korean children's literature may be referenced. In fact, North Korean children's storybooks feature various anecdotes depicting young Dangun practicing martial arts on Hong Mountain behind the current tomb site or training his Girin horse in Cheongyegol to the east of the tomb. These stories were clearly adapted from the Dangun legends that had been circulating in the Pyongyang region. Considering these facts, it appears that details presented in example A originated from the Dangun legends.

Dangun legends are not only featured in textbooks, but also in . "Dangun Joseon and Its Rich History" (Cho Hee-seung, 2004) is a glowing example. Descriptions of Hong Mountain in Pyongyang as Dangun's martial arts practicing grounds and the training of his Girin horse, both appear in this text. According to Cho, because Dangun was proven to have existed in real life, the Dangun legends are valuable historical records that represent historical facts. In other words, since the discovery of Dangun's tomb, any and all myths and legends pertaining to Dangun have been elevated to

facts grounded in history.

As seen so far, myth and legends surrounding Dangun are recognized to be historical facts in North Korea. As a result, the collapse of primitive society and the founding of the ancient slaveholding state were bumped up to before 5,000 years ago, rendering Gojoseon to be a kingdom that existed for 3,000 years.

Example B. Gojoseon stood for 3,000 years. During this time period, Jeon Joseon (Dangun Joseon), Hu Joseon, and Man-Joseon came into existence. They are called the three Joseons. Joseon (Dangun Joseon) existed for 1,500 years, Hu Joseon for 1,200 years, and Man-Joseon for about 100 years. Gojoseon's culture and economy flourished, and its territory expanded to the Ryodong region in China. It became known as a powerful nation in the east.

Gojoseon is said to be divided into the three kingdoms of Jeon Joseon, Hu Joseon, and Man Joseon. It appears that such a division shares similarity with the traditional three-Joseon system comprising of Dangun Joseon, Gija Joseon, and Wiman Joseon. However, North Korean academics have rejected the Gija-dongrae theory from the beginning. It is thought that the three-kingdom system is the result of actively incorporating research findings since the 2000s. The recent studies that differentiate between Jeon Joseon, Hu Joseon, and Man Joseon are based on unofficial historical records such as "Gyuwonsahwa," "Dangigosa," "Dangunsegi," and "Hwandangogi." Interest in these records began to rise after the discovery of Dangun's tomb in 1993. Nevertheless, their incorporation into history was limited to Korean folklore up until the late 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, scholars have been

investigating these records in the study of the history of Gojoseon.

There is no need to state that these unofficial records are forged texts. Even the North Korean academic circles cannot overlook this issue. A research paper delving into this question also found that the records had been forged. Despite the finding, however, they still maintain that some of the records are factual. In fact, the historical value of "Gyuwonsahwa," in particular, is still highly regarded. In other words, notwithstanding the legitimacy issue, North Korean scholars maintain that the text's historical value needs to be reevaluated at this point because Dangun's birth has been clearly proven. Example B suggests such a change. For example, the 1999 Joseon Ryoksa contains a description of Gojosen's "Shinji alphabet" (page 17), which is in keeping with "Gyuwonsahwa."

III. Reinforcement of Nationalism through Dangun and the "Kim Il-song Race"

Since liberation, North Korean academia's Gojoseon studies and education have been tainted with modern nationalism. Up until the mid-1960s, however, the scientific nature of Marxist historiography had been lauded, upon which various theories were based. Additionally, the academic atmosphere of the time was not conducive to ostentatious displays of nationalism. Nationalism clashed with internationalism, and it was deemed to be incongruent with the interests of the masses. However, as Juche ideology was established as the dominant political ideology in the 1970s, nationalism was reevaluated. After the 1990s, nationalism was interpreted under a new light as a progressive ideology. In fact, the

discovery of Dangun's tomb intensified the emphasis on pure racial bloodlines, transforming the ideology into ethnic nationalism.

Joseon Ryoksa published after the year 1999 describes the Daedong River Basin as one of the cradles of ancient civilization. According to the text, the first humans, who evolved from homo erectus to homo sapiens, appeared in the Daedong River Basin and then in Joseon-in. Such a description is based on the so-called Daedong River civilization theory introduced after 1997, which traced the race's unified bloodline to the origin of humans. In other words, the North Korean race has been elevated to one which appeared at the dawn of human existence, transcending all history. In this assertion, Dangun served as a mediating loop with which to transform the transcendental race into one firmly grounded in historical fact.

It is said that the discovery of Dangun's tomb and its survey-research efforts began with Kim Il-song's directive, and that its restoration was carried out under Kim Jong-il's direction. In other words, Dangun's tomb is regarded a historical site that was discovered only through the Kims' leadership. Dangun-Gojoseon education is also regarded a product of their leadership. Such "leadership" is said to have sown the seed of patriotism and ethnic nationalism in its people. In fact, North Korea's patriotism and ethnic nationalism served the strong political purpose of maintaining the regime's stability after the 1990s when the collapse of socialism became a reality. That is, Dangun-Gojoseon education became a mere tool with which to achieve the regime's political goals. On this note, it is worth noting that Dangun, the progenitor of the Joseon race, is compared to Kim Il-song, the progenitor of socialist Joseon. Recently, North Korea has asserted that its bloodline can

only progress and maintain its purity through the guidance of a great leader. In other words, the long history of a homogenous race that dates back to the days of Dangun must be continued with Kim Il-song and Kim Jong-il in the center. The thing is, the race referred to here is not the Han race of modern nationalism, but the “Kim Il-song race.”

Such a concept first appeared in the 1980s under Kim Il-song. By promoting the ideology of the greatest Joseon race, the regime sought to integrate nationalism and socialism and to assert the legitimacy of the North Korean Joseon race led by the greatest leader, Kim Il-song. The idea of the “Kim Il-song race” was born out of these efforts. North Korea formed a great family composed of the fatherly leader, the motherly party, and the people. Here, Dangun imbues historical legitimacy and longevity to the “Kim Il-song race.”

North Korea's new Dangun-race perception is clearly different from that of modern nationalism. In the early twentieth century, Dangun was the core of the nationalist movement against colonialism. Dangun has also provided an important base upon which to assert the need for unification since the North-South division. The race originated from Dangun, and the nationalist movement was born of him. However, the current “Kim Il-song race” of North Korea does not include South Korea or its people. In the North Korean “Kim Il-song race,” Dangun is succeeded by Kim Il-song and his family. South Korea and its people are excluded from Dangun's descendants, and they are merely a target to conquer.

As seen so far, North Korea's Dangun-Gojoseon education, since the discovery of Dangun's tomb, puts an emphasis on the race's

pure bloodline, patriotism, and ethnic nationalism with a great leader guiding the race at its core (the ancient state's Dangun - the modern socialist Joseon's Kim Il-song). It is an effort to securely maintain the Kim family's political power and authority. In this sense, the 1993 discovery of Dangun's tomb is not a coincidence. The overemphasis on Dangun, in particular, is for the sake of the "Kim Il-song race." In fact, it was the North Korean regime's political scheme by which it monopolized nationalism.

IV. Conclusions

As many researchers have pointed out, North Korea's nationalism has the characteristics of ethnic nationalism. In a sense, it is similar to the family state, which had been pursued by the Japanese. Naturally, elements of various ethnic nationalism or Japan's militarism can be found in it. It assigns the greatest value on a nation led by a powerful leader. North Korea's recent Dangun-Gojoseon history studies and education displays elements of such nationalism. In this sense, the fact that North Korea's history textbooks highlight Dangun's heroic identity as a leader, as opposed to someone who oppresses and exploits his people, calls for our attention.

Keywords: North Korea, Old-Joseon, ethnic nationalism, nationalism, family state

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