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## Shamanic Epics and Narrative Construction of Identity on Cheju Island

### Abstract

Oral traditions can contain elements of historical evidence and convey meaning. The narrative pattern of oral epics serves not merely as “a mnemonic device” that aids in recalling significant historical events but makes meaningful connections to the cultural experience of identity politics. On Cheju Island, a volcanic island located some fifty miles below the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula, the indigenous sense of identity and history is expressed and accentuated in the fate of the shrine deities who are portrayed as exiles in shamanic epics such as *ponhyang ponp'uri*. The tragic heroism in the cliché of exile and return of the shrine deities recapitulates the historical identity of Cheju people as “exiles at the frontier.” After Cheju Island lost political autonomy as an independent kingdom, Tam-ra, in the early twelfth century, the Cheju people’s cultural memory of isolation and redemptive desire for liberation from the mainland state’s domination becomes intelligible and justifiable textually through the heroic acts of exiled deities.

**Keywords:** shamanic epics—narrative—identity—cultural schema—Cheju Island

SINCE JAN VANSINA's suggestion in his classic *Oral Tradition* (1961), it has been widely acknowledged that oral traditions can provide important historical data. Although oral traditions do not describe actual historical events, they can contain elements of historical evidence. By definition, oral traditions stress the fact of "transmission" through ages. However, the historicity of oral traditions does not merely serve to retrieve the past or confirm the present. Oral traditions convey meaning—that is, cultural values and experiences—rather than aspects of the past. In fact, the distinction between the historical dimension and the mythical dimension is often unclear. Even mythical episodes can contain elements of historical truth. Specific events described in oral traditions can symbolize historical processes lasting over long periods of time. In mythical terms, the epic tales describe not only the origin of certain social groups but also express the tensions which existed among them.

This paper examines the way in which shamanic epics and oral traditions reflect the social history of Cheju Island, focusing on narrative construction of place and sense of identity. A volcanic island located some fifty miles below the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula, Cheju Island has kept its indigenous cultural and religious heritage different from mainland Korea due to its geographical and political isolation. Although the people of Cheju Island also use Korean language, their dialect is unique and mostly incomprehensible to mainland Koreans. Their oral traditions are well preserved because they have been transmitted through shamanic epics, *ponp'uri*.<sup>1</sup> Among the *ponp'uri* that are still actively recited by the shaman during rituals, *ponhyang ponp'uri*, the origin-stories of the tutelary gods of village shrines, reflect the indigenous conceptions of identity and history.

Originally Cheju Island was an independent tribal state, Tam-ra, ruled by an indigenous king and several princes who formed a federation of separate estates owned by three major clan groups, Ko, Yang, and Pu.<sup>2</sup> However, after Tam-ra was annexed to the mainland dynastic state, Koryo, in 1105, Cheju Island lost political autonomy and became a low level local district

(*kun*) at the southernmost frontier against foreign invasion.<sup>3</sup> This geopolitical reality of Cheju Island's status as a remote frontier conflicts with the indigenous cosmology in which the island is believed to be the sacred land of shrine gods. Shamanic worship of shrine gods has taken the dominant place in the social and religious life of Cheju people.<sup>4</sup> It could be said that Cheju Island has maintained its cultural autonomy until now through the transmission of shamanic epics. *Ponhyang ponp'uri* contain the epic stories which reflect not only the historical establishment of an autonomous cultural and political rule on Cheju Island, but also the political conflicts which existed between the island and the mainland.

Focusing on *ponhyang ponp'uri*, this paper will firstly illuminate their textual features that follow the narrative pattern or the cliché of oral epics. Next, regarding their narrative effect on the identity of Cheju people, it will explore how their textual features are active and dynamic to make meaningful connections to the historical experience and cultural values.<sup>5</sup>

#### A SHORT HISTORY OF CHEJU ISLAND

After Cheju Island became an internal colony of the mainland state in the early twelfth century, Cheju people suffered from political subjugation and economic discrimination. During the Chosun dynasty (1392–1905), the former Tam-ra lords and princes became commoners, and all political authority on Cheju Island was transferred to the governors who were dispatched from the mainland state (HYON Kil-on 1986).<sup>6</sup> Cheju Island was now the southernmost fortress against foreign invasion. The destitution of the Cheju people, who already suffered from harsh natural conditions and poor productivity of the volcanic soil, was aggravated by compulsory tributes (such as horses for military training) to the central government. They also endured lifelong conscription and were forced to build fortresses along the coasts. As the situation worsened, the Law Banning Migration was imposed on all islanders in 1629 in order to prevent a population drain: this was not abolished until 1830. The people virtually lived in a natural prison. Also Cheju Island was the farthest open-air prison of political exiles from the mainland. In the official historical records, the island was treated as a colony of exiles whose seditious and rebellious acts were constantly guarded against and feared.

Indeed, Cheju Island was made a military and cultural frontier because of internal politics. The violent image pervasive in the social history of the island relates to this spatial image of a frontier and also the indigenous sense of identity of its people as "exiles at the frontier." Under these circumstances, the Cheju people's enmity against foreign forces grew so strong that it became deeply rooted in the indigenous culture of resistance and separatism that typified the island later as the island of rebellions. The official account

of the Chosun dynasty commonly described the Cheju people as barbarians with a “rough and rebellious character” who need to be enlightened to and civilized by the Confucian dominant culture (HYON Kil-on 1986). Therefore, if any indigenous revolt broke out, it was promptly and severely crushed by the central army to eliminate the imagined seed of sedition. Due to its political isolation and geographical distance, violent clashes between the Cheju people and the mainland state were carried to extremes (KANG 1991; KO 1989).

The mainland state’s violence against the Cheju people has erupted on this wild frontier in modern times. The most recent violent event is the Cheju April Third Incident (*Sasam Sagon*) in 1948. The Cheju April Third Incident has been officially described as a rebellion of communist guerrillas against a temporary American military occupation (1945–1948) that immediately followed the end of World War II. The Incident, which was conducted under the rubric of a communist witch hunt, resulted in nearly thirty thousand deaths of Cheju people, primarily civilians (KIM 2000).<sup>7</sup> Such large-scale damage and calamity was related to the historical imagery of Cheju Island as a remote rebellious region. In short, Cheju Island constituted a frontier where the perception of indigenous rebellion was created and consistently exploited by the central government.

Nevertheless, such an image of Cheju Island is only an officially imagined landscape. The indigenous people imagined this reality differently. Cheju people maintained their primordial identity of an independent nation of Tam-ra in oral traditions in which Cheju Island is the sacred land where shamanic gods and ancestors inhabit and build foundations for life and community. The shamanic shrines, *tang*, are the territorial unit of this sacred land. The shamanic epics of shrine deities, *ponhyang ponp’uri*, reflect the oppositional structure of these two spatial imageries—a sacred land and a rebellious frontier—and also epitomize the indigenous history of political subjugation and cultural resistance on Cheju Island.

#### SHRINES, GODS, AND EPICS: *PONHYANG PONP’URI*

In the shamanic epics, the gods of village shrines are the first families of the indigenous people and the first settlers of villages. As these gods are revered as ancestors (*chosang*), the indigenous people are referred to as their descendants (*chason*). Therefore the places where these deities dwell are called “the original villages” (*ponhyang*) and are marked as sacred shrines (*tang*).<sup>8</sup> The shamanic shrine, *tang*, has been the central institution in village society and religion. The collective sacrificial rite is regularly performed by the shaman (*simbang*) who is appointed as the priest of the shrine by the villagers. The tutelary deity of the *tang* shrine is called “the lord of the original land” (*ponhyang*

*hanjip*) or simply the land official (*t'ojikwan*). This deity is an omnipotent ruler over the village land, holding the register of the births and deaths of his or her “people” (*paeksong*) (HYON Yong-jun 1986, 162).<sup>9</sup>

The ancestor-descendant relationship between the shrine deities and the villagers embodies the territorial bond of supernatural nationhood centered on the *tang* shrine. The personal identity of the village people stemming from this supernatural nationhood does not change even when a villager goes abroad and lives there permanently. The shrine deities are mythic rulers with their own life histories, *ponhyang ponp'uri*, literally meaning “the original myths of the lords of the land.” Although the shamanic epics are composed of the life stories of shrine deities, the transformation during the time of their life course is in fact identified with the process of foundation, migration, and settlement of the village community and shrine. The shamanic epics explain the reason why the shrine deities settle down at a particular village, and the process by which the first settlers establish a new village.<sup>10</sup> Thus the mythical time of the shrine’s establishment approximates the historical time of the initial formation of a village. Whenever the priestly shaman recites the *ponhyang ponp'uri* at the collective ceremony, the indigenous history of Cheju Island is recounted and transmitted.

There are around two hundred and seventy shamanic shrines and texts of *ponhyang ponp'uri* on Cheju Island (HYON Yong-jun 1992, 82). They reveal the genealogical relationship among the shrine deities, which imply a spatial relationship among the shrines as well.<sup>11</sup> Depending on the origin of birth, the shrine deities are divided into three genealogies: Halmang<sup>12</sup> (Grandmother) Paekchu and her sons; the Mountain Gods of Mt. Halla, who were autochthons (the native expression means “they sprang out from holes”); and the “Seven-day” or “Eight-day” Goddesses, who were married to Mountain Gods or Gods who descended from Halmang Paekchu (HYON Yong-jun 1992, 75–114).<sup>13</sup> These three genealogies of shrine deities are connected through marriage, but each genealogy tends to spread through to a different region respectively: the Halmang Paekchu clan in the central and the north-eastern region, the Mountain Gods in the south-western region, and the “Seven-day” or “Eight-day” Goddesses in the southern region. If the shrine deities belong to the same genealogy, it means that the villages within the same genealogical range share a similar historical experience and identity.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of genealogical and spatial relationship among the shamanic shrines and deities reflects the historical consciousness of the indigenous people, who perceive and imagine the island as a single universe or community. The shamanic epics represent a particular form of historical consciousness deployed dynamically to constitute the Cheju identity. The Cheju shaman’s skill as a professional oral narrator is required to entertain both the shrine

deities and the worshippers. In the process of making and listening to the shamanic epics, the Cheju people reconstitute their cultural identity parallel to that of the protagonists of the epic texts.

The common motives in shamanic epics are very similar, and most of epic stories are made from a combination of selected motives. The motives are concerned with the founding of a mythical family and its division over generations. The male deities, who usually represent the indigenous people, marry the female deities, who are portrayed as foreigners from the mainland. Their offspring are characterized as exiles who were abandoned at an early age by parent deities but later returned home triumphant. The epic stories end with the death of parent deities and the establishment of a new social order by the offspring deities, who are the protagonists of shamanic epics. As the oral performance progresses, the fate of the protagonist becomes congruent with the historical identity of the participating Cheju audience as exiles. In reality, however, the mythical family's division over generations reflects the spatial diffusion of villages and shrines together all around the island.

The shrine deities of Songtang village are the founding ancestors in the genealogy of the shrine deities in the northern region of Cheju Island. They constitute the mythical family of the father, Sochon'guk, the mother, Paekchu, and their son, Song'guksong, from whom eighteen sons, twenty-eight daughters, and three hundred and seventy-eight grandchildren were born. They became shrine deities all around the island.<sup>15</sup> These numbers, which all end with the number eight, are a mythical expression of Cheju society as one with a single genealogy.<sup>16</sup>

Next, I present the short version of the *ponhyang ponp'uri* of the Songtang village shrine, which is regarded as the primordial epic text.

Halmang Paekchu was born the daughter of Imjung'guk at the foothill of Mt. Namsan in Seoul, then came to Cheju, and married Soro Sochon'guk, who was then living alone as a hunter. After producing seven sons, supporting the family became difficult. At the request of Paekchu, they started farming.

One day Sochon'guk was plowing a wide field by himself with the aid of ninety-nine cattle. A monk called Samjinsan passed by and begged for lunch. Sochon'guk gave him his lunch and continued to work in the field. After the monk left, he had nothing to eat for himself. Sochon'guk was so hungry that he ate all ninety-nine cattle, including some he had borrowed from his neighbor's field. Because of this Paekchu rebuked and then divorced him. He moved to a neighboring village and took a concubine, one of the daughters of the five hundred Mt. Halla Generals [a group of deities]. He subsisted there by hunting and swidden farming. Paekchu, who was pregnant at the time of the divorce, survived on wild plants and grain.

Paekchu gave birth to the eighth son, Song'guksong, and raised him alone. When the son turned seven, he was sent to a private school for Chinese Classics. He was insulted by his friends for being an illegitimate child. He asked his mother where his father lived. Together with his mother, the son visited his father. He sat on his father's lap and played with his beard. His father scolded him for being an ill-mannered son, then put Song'guksong in an iron box and threw it into the sea, leaving it to drift away. The box became caught in coral branches and was then guided by three princesses to the palace of the Sea Kingdom.

Song'guksong married the third daughter of the Dragon King of the Sea, who had opened the box. Song'guksong's voracity for food was a problem. He ate meat and rice in great quantities everyday until the entire food storehouse of the Sea Palace was emptied. The Dragon King worried that the Sea Kingdom would soon perish. He decreed that Song'guksong and his wife be placed inside the iron box and set out to sea.

The box arrived at the Southern Kingdom under the rule of the Heavenly Son. Song'guksong predicted a great war in that country just in the nick of time. By calling on the name of his father, Sochon'guk, he won a great victory in the war. Song'guksong killed two-headed and three-headed monster generals. Although the king wanted to reward him with half of that country and also a very high office, Song'guksong refused all offerings and instead wanted to return to Cheju because he missed his parents.

Song'guksong returned to Cheju with many gifts together with a million soldiers by a trading vessel. He and his army arrived at the eastern seashore and moved along hillsides up to Mt. Halla where Songtang village was located. Upon hearing the news of their returning son, who was supposed to have died at the age of seven, his parents Paekchu and Sochon'guk were frightened and ran away to Upper Songtang and Lower Songtang respectively. They died there and became shrine deities—Sochon'guk at Lower Songtang shrine, Paekchu at Upper Songtang shrine. Song'guksong's seven brothers ran off to various places on the island and became shrine deities. The son god Song'guksong took a permanent seat at Mt. Halla and ruled Cheju Island.<sup>17</sup>

This *ponp'uri* is structured in six episodes: (1) the initial migration of Halmang Paekchu from Seoul and her marriage to the Cheju native Sochon'guk; (2) Paekchu's divorce from her giant and voracious husband who moves to a new village; (3) the first exile of their son, Song'guksong, who is confined in the iron box and cast out to sea for disrespecting his father; (4) Song'guksong's marriage to a princess from the Sea Kingdom and his second exile in the iron box due to his voracity for food; (5) his military success in the Southern Land of the Heavenly Son and triumphant return to Cheju Island to exact revenge; (6) the deification of Song'guksong as the new ruler and the establishment of village shrines in various parts of Cheju Island.

The six episodes refer to historical origins, movements, and settlements of Songtang Village, one of the mountain villages located halfway up Mt. Halla, and also Cheju Island itself. According to historical records, this middle region of Mt. Halla was the area of the first settlements because of its vast fertile farmland. If the marriage of Sochon'guk and Paekchu indicates the founding of the village society through a coalition of the original hunters and meat-eaters and the newcomer farmers and rice-eaters, their divorce means village division and population migration. The births of their sons, including Song'guksong, indicate the historical development of Cheju society.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, the family strife typified in the relationship between Sochon'guk and his son, Song'guksong, suggests the historical conflict between the indigenous people and the newcomers from the mainland. However, Song'guksong's triumphant return and the consequent deaths of his parents point to a justification of the establishment of a new political rule by the new generation on Cheju Island. In a nutshell, the shamanic epic of Songtang Village implies the founding myth of Cheju Island.

#### THE CLICHÉ OF EXILE AND RETURN: TRAGIC HEROISM

The story pattern of exile and triumphant return as shown in the case of Song'guksong is the common and consistent element in most of the *ponhyang ponp'uri* on Cheju Island. It acts as a cliché, to employ Joseph Miller's use of the term, serving as "a mnemonic device" that aids in recalling, representing, and transmitting culturally significant historical details to the next generations (MILLER 1980, 8). Because the clichés are "short, often dramatic or striking, sometimes phrased in structured language, and because of all this easily remembered," they are employed by oral narrators to tell culture and refer to a particular history quite deliberately and purposefully. Each ceremonial recitation of the shamanic epics would reproduce the clichés so that one learns to expect and indeed hear regularity in different versions. The regularity of plot development among the various oral traditions explains how actively culture can be engaged in structuring identity and history.

Ortner's notion of "cultural schemas" is useful for the understanding of the cultural forces of the shamanic epics in shaping the indigenous identity and history of Cheju Island. In exploring the role of culture in the historical transformation of Tibetan monastic Buddhism, Ortner proposed the notion of "cultural schemas," which represent "a hegemonic selection, ordering, and freezing of a variety of cultural practices into a particular narrative shape, by virtue of representation in cultural stories—myths, legends, folktales, histories, and so forth" (ORTNER 1990, 63). Cultural schemas mean the cultural patterns of action or cultural dramas that recur over time. As the cultural stories unfold in a certain fixed pattern, the cultural schemas are organized for



enacting heroism and accomplishment of culturally important deeds in history. In the construction of cultural schemas, the storytellers are textually “positioned” authors and simultaneously protagonists of those cultural stories.

The cultural schemas that are embedded in Cheju identity and history are represented in the epic structure of the *ponhyang ponp'uri* of Songtang Village, which is supposedly the archetypal epic of Cheju Island. The cliché of exile and return of the son god Song'guksong follows the conventional mythical order that begins with the suffering of the protagonist and ends with his triumphant return after wandering in exile, as in Homeric tales of tragic heroes. The following analysis of Song'guksong's heroic tale will show how the cliché of exile and return in the shamanic epic functions as the cultural schema in shaping the identity and history of Cheju people as “the exiles at the frontier.”

In the ritual narration of *ponhyang ponp'uri*, the cliché of exile and return becomes a fixed destiny of the Cheju people as both mythmakers and audience. Song'guksong's journey to the underworld, such as the Sea Kingdom, and his victorious return involves a typical theme of a shaman's soul journey, which is the same as the hero's experience of maturing. Song'guksong was abandoned by an angry father, and voyaged to the Sea Kingdom and Southern Country of the Heavenly Son. This journey resembles the out-of-body experience and life-or-death battle of the shamanic hero in general (VITEBSKY 1995, 71). On this voyage, Song'guksong became an adult and got married. The two experiences of abandonment and exile in the iron box imply the process of growing into a man. In the end, he received the honor of being recognized as an invincible general by killing multi-headed monsters and returning home victorious together with a huge army. He threatened his parents and brothers and became the new ruler of Cheju Island. Like the *Odyssey*, this heroic epic of Song'guksong is a story of self-discovery and also discovery of a restored world. At the end of his adventure, Song'guksong assumes great power that allows him to rescue and restore the human world, just as the shaman does. Furthermore, his deification as the mountain god of Mt. Halla implies the magical empowerment of the shamanic epic itself.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the cliché of exile and return of Song'guksong recapitulates the historical identity of the Cheju people as “exiles at the frontier.” The two events of his exile explain how they perceive their historical reality. The first cause of his abandonment and exile was the childish act of plucking his father's beard. Although such an act might ordinarily be brushed aside as the affectionate expression of a child, Song'guksong's minor mistake was punished under the charge of immorality: he violated the typical Confucian moral bond between father and son. The abandonment that followed his transgression predestined him for heroic adventure.

The second cause of Song'guksong's exile is related to his voracious

appetite for food. This is a trait shared by most of the shrine gods in the shamanic epics. Both Song'guksong and Sochon'guk are giant men who "eat nine jars of soup and nine jars of rice," and are very fond of meat. Unfortunately, however, their great appetites are never satisfied. Due to their super-human voracity, Sochon'guk is divorced by Paekchu, the rice eater, and the son is exiled in the iron box by his father-in-law, the King of the Sea Kingdom. When Song'guksong returns to Cheju and settles down at the village shrine, he demands from worshippers the sacrifice of a whole roast pig for a ceremony, known as the *tot'che* ceremony. There is a clear division between the rice-eater deity and the meat-eater deity in the Cheju shamanic pantheon. This line of division in the appetite for food results in gender differentiation in sacrificial offerings and ritual forms. If the female shrine deities accept only rice cakes and fruits, the male shrine deities demand an animal sacrifice in addition.<sup>20</sup> If their rules concerning offerings are transgressed, they threaten to cause twelve kinds of misfortunes to the worshipper. The male deities are supposedly more demanding due to their insatiable hunger. The more powerful the gods' malevolent forces appear, the more easily their desire can be gratified. However, their malevolence and rage appears to be their last recourse if they wish to be worshipped. The relationship between the shrine deities and their worshippers is one of mutual dependency and not of domination.

In this context, the destiny of the epic figure Song'guksong is identified with the historical fate of the Cheju people. In particular, his voracity embodies the indigenous view of historical reality on Cheju Island. His appetite for food, which was so great that it was feared he would bring ruin to the Sea Kingdom, bespeaks the Cheju people's great desire for self-sufficiency, and their defiance and refusal to compromise with unfavorable circumstances. In other words, his insatiable hunger implies a desire for power and liberation from political subjugation of the Cheju people as "exiles at the frontier." This desire for power and self-determination is well portrayed in Song'guksong's warrior-like character. He was an invincible warrior whose physical prowess was proved by his military triumphs, such as the killing of the multi-headed monster generals. However, as Song'guksong was exiled twice due to his voracity, his extraordinary military feats determined his fate as an exile. As this tragic hero was feared for his extraordinary character, he was thus exiled at an early age before he was able to fully develop his potential and rebel against the dominant power.

#### REDEMPTIVE POWER OF ORAL EPICS AND LEGENDS

In this context, the common motif of tragic heroism in the *ponhyang pon'puri* reflects the Cheju people's historical experiences. Their cultural memory of

exile and rebellion becomes intelligible and justifiable textually through the heroic acts of exiled deities. Due to their extraordinary warrior-like characters, the shrine deities were greatly feared. The shamanic epic of General Kumsangnim, the shrine deity of Sewha Village, shows concretely how historical experiences are interlaced with oral epic stories. General Kumsangnim is a more historicized tragic hero than Song'guksong because of his direct confrontation with the mainland central state. He was a giant generalissimo who was born in Seoul, was nine feet tall, and whose eyes were as big as those of a Chinese phoenix (HYON Yong-jun 1980a, 661–76). He would look toward the palace in Seoul and threaten the king with fires day and night. The angry king tried to kill this giant deity, who was branded as a rebel possessed with magical power. Kumsangnim managed to avoid this fate and was exiled to Cheju by ship, together with a million-man army. He settled down on Cheju and became the shrine deity of Sewha Village.<sup>21</sup>

The narrative themes of voracity for meat and military prowess, which are developed in these two epics of tragic heroism, are hidden incentives for the Cheju storyteller to justify rebellion. The rebellious acts of the tragic heroes are related developmentally. If Song'guksong's act of plucking his father's beard indicates a moral transgression of the dominant Confucian ideology, his act of extraordinary voracity and military prowess in the latter part of the epic demonstrates his rebellious will. The triumphant return of the tragic heroes bears witness to the indigenous will to rebel, and also the redemptive desire for power and political autonomy.

However, the triumphant return of shrine deities was never fully realized. Their superhuman powers and rebellious characters were confined to Cheju Island because they had few alternatives or realistic means to escape their fate as "frontier exiles." On the other hand, it is precisely because of the extraordinariness of the mythical figures that Cheju people could at least dream of liberation from their state of exile.

The Cheju people's redemptive desire is more clearly expressed in the legends of baby generals who are born with mysterious wings at their armpits. Here the wings indicate the people's desire to fly and escape from the reality of being "exiles at the frontier." Here is the core plot of this kind of legend on the mainland (HYON Kil-on 1986, 250–51):

Once upon a time a baby was born to a poor peasant. Within a few days after birth, the parents found wings at his armpits. Out of fear that their family would produce a rebel, they killed the baby. When the baby died, there was the sound of thunder, and somewhere a dragon horse cried out loud and then died. A big pond appeared at the place where the dragon horse died.

It is a tragedy when such an extraordinary baby is born in the commoner's class. According to the mainland version of the legend, the baby general was promptly killed by his parents due to their acute fear of the dominant morality that represses any hint of rebellion against the kingship. But the Cheju version of the legend shows a different treatment of the wings. The wings are found somewhat later, after the baby has grown a little. Until then the wings are hidden. When the parents find the wings at his armpits, they merely remove them with scissors but do not kill the baby himself. As a result, this extraordinary baby continues to grow, but lives the comparatively lesser life of a strong man with physical prowess: he never becomes a real general. The loud cry of a dragon horse implies the lament of Cheju people at their destiny.

Even if the baby general fails to become a real general, the people's redemptive vision of escape from destiny could be sustained through their faith in the mythical wings. The parent's act of cutting off the wings symbolizes the suppression of this desire and a careful attitude of adjustment to reality. This represents the wisdom of exiled lives at the frontier (HYON Kil-on 1986, 248). The invisible wings hide in themselves redemptive desire. A redemptive power of imagination is secretly harbored. Nevertheless, this secrecy does not end up with shrewd self-resignation of the baby general. Under an oppressive situation, this secretive desire for rebellion surfaces in more explicit confrontations with the dominant power as it appears in the legends of the Cheju governors.

#### SPIRITUAL COLONIZATION AND NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

In the history of the domestic colonization policy during the Chosun dynasty, the governors of Cheju Island used iconoclastic measures to effectively implement the Confucian dominant religious policy. They degraded local shamanism as the barbaric superstition of a stupid and unenlightened folk. They demolished shamanic shrines and forced the priestly shamans to become farmers. They replaced their customs with Confucian ancestor worship and nature worship. Their goals lay in consolidating the central state's hegemony over the local powers and spiritual colonization. Resisting this, the Cheju people expressed their sense of cultural identity through narrative means. In the legends of the governors, the supernatural lordship of the shrine deities is reclaimed and the governors are finally defeated.

Among the governors during the Chosun dynasty, Governor Lee Hyung-sang appears frequently in the legends. Thus it is worth discussing in detail the historical events related to his iconoclastic policy toward indigenous religious practices. He came to Cheju Island in 1702 and governed for two years. After the first year of administration, he implemented a restructuring policy that aimed at the Confucian reformation of local customs and re-edification

of the superstitious people. He abolished one hundred and twenty-nine shamanic shrines, including the four most powerful ones, and hundreds of Buddhist temples. For this reason, his iconoclastic measures were referred to as the “five hundred shamanic shrines and five hundred Buddhist temples.” He ordered the burning of all privately owned ritual paraphernalia taken from the shamans’ houses. He imposed a special tax on the shamans who would not be able to pay, and would therefore lose their licenses. He forced more than four hundred shamans, who lost their priestly roles, back to farming. What he called “a civilizing measure” was accomplished within a year.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of Governor Lee’s iconoclasm lay in the project of consolidation of the local power to the central state as well as spiritual colonization. In his memoirs of his term on Cheju Island, Governor Lee explained the reason for such harsh measures: to curb the influence of the Cheju shamans, who had exercised more power over the people than the officials.<sup>22</sup> Governor Lee described shamanic practices as useless and the most perilous evil in the world, and rebuked the people’s “ignorance and stupidity” (HYON Kil-on 1983, 110). His iconoclasm principally aimed at civilizing the superstitious “barbarians” with neo-Confucian morality.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the demolition of shamanic shrines, Governor Lee abolished folk festivals, such as the street parade of shamanic dancing and playing music for the blessing of households in the village, and also collective ceremonies in reverence of awesome natural phenomena, such as clouds, rain, wind, and lightning. Instead, he replaced them with new government-officiated Confucian ceremonies (*sanchonche*) for the reverence of the mountain deity (HYON Kil-on 1983, 112). Governor Lee petitioned to the central government that Mt. Halla be celebrated as a sacred mountain at national ceremonies. Although Mt. Halla was not included in that celebrated group of mountains as he petitioned, the king on the mainland allowed it to be celebrated in a lower level ceremony. This kind of domestication of indigenous deities was part of a much deeper strategic exercise: subjugation of the magical powers of the sacred mountain, Mt. Halla, to the state.

Nevertheless, the local legends convey a contradictory understanding of Governor Lee’s accomplishments. The popular interpretation of the same historical events shows a subversive counter-discourse that opposes the official justification of Governor Lee’s iconoclasm. Among numerous versions, a legend in Kimnyong Village that represents the typical story of Governor Lee’s legends is as follows:

Governor Lee destroyed five hundred *tang* shrines and five hundred temples, but he also rebuilt the old ruined graves, which were in danger of exhumation. He also repelled a serpent living in the cave at Kimnyong Village, which was

worshipped by the villagers. After he wound up his service, he was about to leave for the mainland. But his ship could not leave soon due to heavy winds. At night an old gentleman with a long white beard appeared in his dream. He promised to suppress the wind so that Governor Lee could leave next morning. After his death, Governor Lee's tomb was covered by the serpent, which revived in order to exact revenge. (HYON Yong-jun 1980b, 191–93)

This legend of Governor Lee is mixed with similar legends about the Serpent Cave at Kimnyong Village and Governor Ki Kon's restoration of the old ruined graves. According to the legend of the Serpent Cave, a huge serpent living in the cave regularly received a living sacrifice of a young maiden every year in order to guarantee a good harvest and the well-being of the villagers. The serpent was killed by Governor Seo Rin, who suppressed the people's faith in the shrine god. Riding back to the office, however, the triumphant Governor Seo ignored the shaman's warning not to look back to the cave. When he heard a shout "It's raining blood on your back!" he looked back and died immediately on the spot. Historically, Governor Seo Rin abolished the cave shrine ceremony at Kimnyong Village, and Governor Ki Kon introduced for the first time the Confucian ritual of burial and ancestor worship in the fifteenth century, some two hundred years earlier than Governor Lee Hyung-sang's advent (HYON Yong-jun 1980b, 206–208. HYON Kil-on 1983, 101). According to Governor Ki's legend, the *tang* shrine gods caused strong winds. In spite of the shrine gods' resistance, Governor Ki managed to leave the island secretly a few days later with the help of ghosts from the old graves he restored. The shrine gods came to know this and ran to the shore in order to chase him away but it was too late—Governor Ki already had left. However, his three sons living in his home village died suddenly before he arrived.

These legends and historical episodes were mixed together and incorporated into the legend of Governor Lee Hyung-sang (HYON Kil-on 1983, 100–103). In contrasting the governor's restoration of the old graves with the indigenous shrine gods' revenge, local storytellers illuminated the ideological confrontation between the Confucian conception of ancestor (who appeared as an old man with a long white beard) and the indigenous conception of ancestor (who appeared as a serpentine-shaped cave shrine god).<sup>24</sup> By highlighting this confrontation, the legend of Governor Lee reveals the popular conviction that the destroyer of *tang* shrines was not able to leave the island without trouble and was eventually punished by the shrine gods. The vengeance of the snake spirit lying coiled up on Governor Lee Hyung-sang's grave shows how the indigenous people denounced the absolute authority of

the governor, while not failing to imply the futility of his iconoclasm and consolidation project.

Despite the successful implementation of Confucianism historically, it is supposedly the shrine gods who win their battle against state consolidation, at least in the oral traditions. Interestingly enough, the legendary serpent in the Serpent Cave at Kimnyong Village appears to be the mythical replica of the shrine gods Kwoe'negito in the same village and Song'guksong at Songtang Village.<sup>25</sup> Although these shrine gods are confined to the local shrines, they ultimately escaped their fate of exiles and confront the state power via the cave serpent's adventurous act of revenge. As such, the fictional victory attests the Cheju people's consistent faith in the shrine deities and also their redemptive will to resist against spiritual colonization and political consolidation by the mainland state power. Interestingly enough, the shrine deity of Serpent Cave at Kimnyong Village is identical to Kwoe'negito and Song'guksong, the son gods of Halmang Paekchu, the tutelary goddess of Songtang shrine. The legacy of shamanic faith in the spiritual solidarity among the shrine gods against external forces has continued intact even in the modern times.

MODERN LEGEND OF SURVIVAL DURING THE APRIL THIRD INCIDENT OF 1948  
The religious resistance of the Cheju people against colonization has persisted through to modern times.<sup>26</sup> The new legend related to the experiences during the April Third Incident of 1948 proves the persistence of shamanic faith in shrine deities. It also proves the empowering effect the shamanic epic itself had in terms of the people's survival during violent clashes with the mainland state.

Although the April Third Incident occurred in 1948, the Cheju people continued to suffer from bloody clashes between indigenous mountain guerrillas and anti-communist forces until 1954. At that time, around half of the three hundred villages on Cheju Island were burnt and destroyed by the suppressive military and police forces for the purpose of isolating the mountain guerrillas from the people. Because most of the military and police forces were drafted and dispatched from the mainland, their suppression measures developed into total destruction and merciless massacre on the village level (CHEJU PROVINCIAL ASSEMBLY 1995). The villages located in the middle region of Mt. Halla received the most violent treatment. Regardless of ideological preference, communist or rightist, Cheju people's lives were in such a precarious position that, as is illustrated in the following legend of Songtang Village shrine, their survival throughout this violent period was attributed to the divine protection of shrine deities.

Songtang Village was one of the mountainous villages that was spared from total destruction. A regimental force sent to suppress guerrillas was

stationed in the village during the April Third Incident. Interestingly enough, unlike most other villages in the middle region of Mt. Halla, there were no major violent events, such as massacre or property damage.<sup>27</sup> The Songtang people explain this as the divine protection of the shrine deity, Halmang Paekchu. They believed that their shrine deity was so powerful that no Confucian-official-mountain-worship shrine (*songhwangtang*) could replace the indigenous deity. They also believed that the Halmang deity protected the village from the perils of fatal contagious diseases, such as cholera, and from the anti-superstition campaign. During the Japanese colonial period, village officials who had cut down the sacred shrine trees and destroyed the shrine house died prematurely, and their deaths were attributed to the Halmang deity. According to the villagers, it is entirely due to the Halmang deity's power that Songtang Village had fewer victims than other villages on Cheju during the April Third Incident.

The legend regarding this protective power of Halmang Paekchu during the April Third Incident is as follows:

Halmang Paekchu appeared in the dream of the police chief who then stayed on in the village as a part of the anti-communist suppression forces. Dressed in a white traditional skirt, she was sitting on the shrine ground. The police chief, who came from mainland Korea, did not recognize her. He asked the village shaman for interpretation of the dream. The shaman interpreted the dream as indicating that the Halmang was protecting the village and villagers from attack by mountain guerrillas and the counter-insurgency suppression forces by covering them with her skirt. Afterwards, the police chief permitted the villagers to worship the Grandmother. Then the shaman and the Kim clan group, which was the highest worshipper class and also the founding clan group, worked together to restore the shrine from damage and rebuild a shrine house.<sup>28</sup>

This legend about the dream apparition of the shrine deity and the restoration of the village shrine attests the people's unwavering faith in Paekchu's spiritual power. What the villagers were mainly concerned with during the April Third Incident was surviving through the violence. Within the framework of their faith, the dream apparition of the Grandmother turned into a reality, which was manifested in the restoration of the village shrine and the preservation of the villagers' lives. The Grandmother's spiritual power here is reconstituted as a resistant, yet mystical, counter-force against any violence from outside.

Also, in the narrative context the restoration of the Halmang Paekchu shrine located at the boundary between the village and the mountain implies



the restoration of the spatial division between life and death, which had been temporarily blurred due to the invasion of outside forces. Thus the villagers could protect their spiritual territory from the threat of violent and deadly clashes and save their lives. This contemporary legend of the Songtang Village shrine deity suggests the way in which the Cheju people use the convention of oral traditions and constantly recreate them for the purpose of survival and cultural autonomy.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried to illuminate the extent to which the indigenous sense of identity and history is expressed and accentuated in the fate of the shrine deities who are portrayed as exiles in the shamanic epics and historical legends. The shamanic epics and legends are structured by pairs of tragic conflicts between rebellious sons and their parents, between indigenous and foreign-born deities, and between shrine gods and governors. The perception of tragic conflicts as being prevalent among the epic figures has produced the indigenous consciousness of Cheju history as tragedy. This tragic sense of history emerging in the shamanic epics and legends articulates the rhetoric about place and the identity of Cheju people as tragic heroes and “frontier exiles.”

After Cheju Island lost political autonomy as an independent kingdom and was incorporated into the mainland dynastic kingdom in the early twelfth century, the people’s desire for autonomy subsided and turned into cultural resistance. The epic heroes, who were exiled and hungry, and whose wings were cut off, embody the self-image of the Cheju people. Living in the same devastated reality as their epic heroes like Song’guksong and Kwoe’negito, the people imagine them flying and escaping the island or returning from exile in order to avenge and reestablish a new social order. These fantastic elements of shamanic epics and legends reflect the indigenous people’s redemptive desires for liberation from the mainland state’s domination.

To put it in a different way, just as the narrative time of a mythical event transforms into the “public time” of historical reality (RICOEUR 1980, 184), the Cheju people’s desire for cultural and political independence was manifested and realized through the historical events of the peasant revolts in the nineteenth century and armed uprisings in modern times. Once the clichés of exile and return in oral traditions have taken hold in the popular consciousness, they allow the audience to remember and transmit their historical memories by giving them a mythic structure.

As is shown in the modern legend of Halmang Paekchu at Songtang Village, the restoration of shamanic shrines and survival through the violent April Third Incident of 1948 attests to a consistent vision for cultural and political autonomy. While interpreting the meaning of this violent historical

event, the Cheju people recreated it as a culture of resistance and autonomy by means of mythic shrine deities' victories over outside forces. By transforming every social and historical experience into oral narratives, the Cheju people represent their past and present it in mythical and cosmological terms. The shamanic epics (*ponhyang ponp'uri*) and oral traditions effectively interlace the indigenous cosmology of ancestral land with the social history of Cheju Island.

#### NOTES

1. Compared to the shamanism in other regions of mainland Korea, Cheju shamanic tradition is rather unique in two aspects: firstly, there are a lot more myths; secondly, these mythic stories have perfect epic structures. Scholars of Cheju shamanism tend to classify three types of *ponp'uri*: twelve general epics regarding genesis, human fate of life and death, and afterlife; epics of village shrine gods; and epics of clan ancestors. In this paper, I focus mainly on the epics of village shrine gods. See CHANG 1973; HYON Yong-jun 1992.

2. The foundation myths of these three kingly clans were supposedly composed much later through the combination of several oral epics of shrine gods (CHO 1997, 80).

3. After annexation in 1105, the title of Tam-ra State was lost and replaced by Cheju, the current title of the island. As a local province, Cheju was governed by an official who was dispatched by the mainland central government.

4. Foreign religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity have never succeeded in taking root on the island. Cheju shamanism is quite different from mainland shamanism in terms of mythology and ritual forms. Cheju shamanic mythology is a unique phenomenon to the extent that it consists of a perfect combination of origin myths of cosmos and Cheju society, and its epic style does not exist on the mainland (CHO 1997, 49).

5. Since Malinowski's notion of "mythical charters," social anthropologists assumed the homology between the narrative structure and the social political institutions of the people who told oral traditions. While agreeing that oral traditions function as "mythical charters," this paper emphasizes the process of "making oral traditions" from the perspective of the narrator and the author of the oral texts. I examine how the oral narrators construct their narratives, what evidential materials they have at hand, and by what procedures they combine them into purported representations of the oral traditions (MILLER 1980, 4). In this process of "making oral traditions" the oral narrators become the subject of history, "doing history." On the other hand, the historical experiences also function as organizing elements in the composition and transmission of oral epic texts (FOLEY 1986, 205).

6. In oral traditions, most governors were commonly characterized as corrupt and exploitative. Even local elite and powerful figures whose influence was not strong enough to withstand the corruption of the governors cooperated with them.

7. For detailed descriptions of the way in which the violent experiences during the April Third Incident of 1948 are remembered through spirit possession and healed through shamanic rituals, see KIM 1989, 2000.

8. In a few cases, the graves of the deities are located precisely at special spots, and the relics of the deities, such as the matted braids of a goddess, are displayed at the altar. Most shamanic shrines are marked by huge Chinese nettle trees standing conspicuously tall at the boundary between the residential area and the fields. Inside the shrine there is a stone altar or a small house where colorful silky cloths and jewelry boxes are kept.

9. Normally there are several shamanic shrines, but there is only one shrine for the mythical founder of the village, which is called *ponhyang tang*. The rest of the shrines are built for the deities who help in areas of people's lives, such as farming, fishing, animal husbandry, or healing children's diseases. Sometimes the shrine deities are related to each other as a family, but usually they have a different story of settlement at shrines, without any particular connection to other shrine deities in the village.

10. Most Cheju villages consist of one or two clan groups. In this case, once the shrine deities settle down in a certain village, they call upon the representatives of the clan groups, declare their sovereignty, and instruct their charges on when and how to worship them.

11. The primordial type of *ponp'uri* is the simple prayer for particular matters: for example, "the original ancestor, merciful lord, the dragon lady, this man of [a certain age] from [such and such] village prays to you." Once it becomes more complex with more mythic figures in the story, its content develops into an epic story (HYON Yong-jun 1992, 82).

12. On Cheju Island, shamanic deities are referred to as "grandmother" (*halmang*) or "grandfather" (*harubang*) in an everyday context, as if they were family ancestors.

13. These goddesses receive ritual offerings three times a month, at ten-day intervals, starting on the seventh or eighth day of the month. Different from Halmang Paekchu who receives only rice cakes, "Seven-day" or "Eight-day" Goddesses receive meat offerings. For this reason of food offering, they were abandoned by their husband gods. Alone in exile, they gave birth to sons and became shrine deities at shrines separate from those of their husbands (HYON Yong-jun 1992, 101–104). Their tragic fate as exiles is similar to that of the son gods who are also abandoned and exiled by their fathers. Such a tragic heritage of abandonment and exile for son gods and meat-eating goddesses through generations indicates actually the political division and geographical migration of village people as well as regional diffusion of shamanic faith in shrine deities.

14. According to mythological studies, Halmang Paekchu and her son gods are assumed to be visiting deities from outside, as their epics are much more complex and well developed than those of indigenous deities, such as the Mountain Gods of Mt. Halla. See CHO 1997; HYON Yong-jun 1992.

15. At Songtang village, Halmang Paekchu is referred to as Kum Paekchu. Her surname Kum indicates the Kim clan. This naming of the local tutelary deity stems from the fact that the Kim clan is the dominant social group in this village. In the ritual context, the Kim clan exercises social and religious power as the highest-ranked client (*sang tan'gol*) in the worshippers' community.

16. According to Cheju mythology, the number eight indicates divinity, and its numeric augmentation through generations means spatial extension of divine powers on the island.

17. This short version is based on the combined stories of the Songtang shrine myth (JIN 1991, 409–10) and the Kwoe'negi shrine myth at Kimnyong village (HYON Yong-jun 1980a, 636–47; JIN 1991, 371–74). The Kwoe'negi shrine god, Kwoe'negito, is the eighth son of the parent gods of the Songtang shrine (JIN 1991, 416). Although Song'guksong appears to be the first son of the parent gods in both shrine myths, he is identical with Kwo'negito in terms of being a mythical character of the tragic hero who was abandoned by parents but returned home to exact revenge. Two shrine myths have almost the same story but their emphasis is different. The Songtang shrine myth focuses on the marriage and divorce of the parent gods, Paekchu and Sochon'guk, whereas the Kwoe'negi shrine myth emphasizes the heroic battles of the son god fighting against multi-headed monsters. Songtang village was divided into three districts: Upper, Middle, and Lower Songtang. This division was represented by three separate shrines for Halmang Kum Paekchu, Sochon'guk's concubine, and Sochon'guk, respectively.

18. Song'guksong is referred to alternately as Mun'guksong in other versions of the Songtang

shrine epic, and among the nine versions, the name Mun'guksong is used most often. I prefer using the name Song'guksong as it is used in the unabridged version (JIN 1991, 411).

19. Miller explains this device of chronological distance between exile and return, and of making an abrupt change of mythic protagonist leading to final victorious conquest, as the “magical” rhetoric of the oral traditions (MILLER 1980, 36).

20. But in the case of “Seven-day” or “Eight-day” Goddesses, they accept one whole roasted pig as a ritual offering. In their epic story, they do not have the voracity for meat as male deities do; instead, they simply get nourishment from pigs’ footprints, and from smelling the smoke of burnt pig hair. For this trivial violation, they were abandoned by their husbands and exiled far away from their home village. Like Song'guksong, their minor fault was harshly punished.

21. According to the *ponp'uri* of the Sewha Village shrine, General Kumsangnim was exiled to Cheju and married Paekchuto, the granddaughter of Heavenly God Chon'jato. Here the suffix “to” indicates the divine character of Paekchu and Chon'ja. Paekchuto is the figure identical with Halmang Paekchu in the case of the Songtang shrine epic. Kumsangnim is also similar to Song'guksong. The textual features of the two *ponp'uri* of the Sewha and Songtang shrines are very similar, but there is a major difference in terms of Kumsangnim and Paekchuto's marital relationship. They are no longer mother and son; they are now husband and wife. Both deities are born in Seoul and experience abandonment and exile: Paekchuto is abandoned at the age of seven by her parents for mischievous acts and sent out to sea, and Kumsangnim is exiled by the mainland state for fear of his rebellious potential. Both deities are exiled to Cheju Island and marry there by the mediation of Heavenly God Chon'jato, whose mythical character is very close to Sochon'guk, the father in the Songtang shrine *ponp'uri*. Between the two *ponp'uri*, there appears an interesting shift in epic structure: the single adventure story of the son god Song'guksong is divided into the two stories of Paekchuto and Kumsangnim and then mixed through their marriage.

22. Governor Lee Hyung-sang was not only a rigid Confucian ruler but also well versed in Cheju culture and customs. He published a book, *Namwhan Paḡmulji* 南甯博物誌 [The natural history of Cheju Island according to Namwhan] in 1702 during his governorship. Namwhan was his pen name. In this book, he stated that the most impressive customs of Cheju Island to him were shamanistic practices. Perhaps his broad knowledge of curiosities and methodology of meticulous observation made possible his massive and destructive measures against shamanism.

23. Governor Lee's iconoclastic policy was accepted and supported by the local elite class and Confucian scholars at that time. According to the dynastic record made a century later in 1819, he was officially worshipped at a Confucian temple in response to local Confucian literati's petition to commemorate his successful iconoclastic project. A monument titled “commemoration of edification for people” was built in his honor (HYON Kil-on 1983, 99).

24. Cheju people seem to have ambivalent feelings about snake spirits: one is fear, the other respect. On Cheju Island, most villages have volcanic caves below surface lands. The people's worship of snake spirits at the cave shrines reflect how they perceive their ecological environment. For more detailed discussion about the snake faith, see HUNT 1990.

25. See note 17. Actually the legend of the Cave Serpent developed into a shamanic myth of Kwoe'negito, which was recited at a certain date in a shrine ceremony (JIN 1991, 380).

26. The strong spirit of resistance is well represented in the indigenous expression about the historical status of the shamanic shrine, “the shrine that even Governor Lee could not burn down.”

27. During the April Third Incident, the mid-mountain area ranging five kilometers from the seashore was considered an “enemy region” and all the villagers in that region were forcibly

removed to the coastal villages. The punitive forces burnt down all villages and massacred whoever remained there, most of them peasants who hesitated to leave their cattle and fields. The survivors of this massacre fled to the mountains and hid in caverns. Once the cavern hideaways were found, the refugees were killed on the spot (KIM 2000, 467).

28. This legend was collected during my fieldwork in 1998.

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