The Chinese “Pangu” Myth And The Korean “Dangun” Myth: Comparative Essay

Introduction

A myth is a traditional story usually containing an examination of the history of mankind which typically involves supernatural beings or events. Different regions of the world are paired with different mythologies, connecting geographical areas to long, cultural histories of certain peoples. Mythologies are outstandingly important - early people cherished these myths as truth in their golden days as an explanation for the gift of life and as an explanation of reality. The Creation mythologies of Korea and China beautifully connect the themes of Heaven and Earth, Yin-Yang and animal symbolism, creating a foundation of a healthy society. Some, however, believe these creation myths are not as important as history dictates. Young-chan Ro, a professor of Religious Studies at George Mason Univerity, claims (about the Chinese Pangu myth), “The Pangu legend is not equivalent to an eastern creation myth in many respects.” (Ro, 2012) Regarding the Korean Dangun myth, he claims, “The myth of Dangun in Korea is a nation-founding myth, not a creation myth.” (Ro, 2012) I believe these dismissive comments do not properly reflect the importance of the myths. The Chinese and Korean creation mythologies bud from ancient “word of mouth” storytelling that dates back before the creation of some major religions. Contrary to Ro’s belief, creation mythology’s importance proves itself by continuing to be a foundation of eastern Asian culture and religion.

The Chinese Creation Myth - Pangu

The Chinese Creation myth, known as the Story of Pangu, is a myth about the first living creature and creator of the World. Pangu was born in chaos: Heaven and Earth were in perpetual eternal conflict that existed within a metaphorical “black egg” for all of time. Pangu grew in this black egg for 18,000 years, finally splitting it with an ax. Pangu is born and realizes he must hold up the top and push down the bottom of the shell to maintain order to the universe. Pangu held up the top half of the egg (the sky) and pushed down the bottom half (Earth) for another 18,000 years, gaining aid from four animals: a dragon, phoenix, quilin, and turtle. After these 18,000 years, Pangu perishes, leaving his body to create the ground, the parasites of his body to become humans, the top of the shell to form the sky, and the bottom of the shell to form the earth.

Pangu is accompanied by four different animals (a dragon, phoenix, quilin, and turtle) that all signify important positive character traits, teaching its readers what is needed to maintain the stability of the universe. The dragon, in Chinese culture, symbolizes energy and good fortune and is a bringer of good luck. The turtle emphasizes endurance, long life and prosperity. The qilin, a hooved chimera, is a harbinger of happiness and wealth. The phoenix - containing the human values of virtue and harmony - captures the subject of positive male and female relationships. Pangu was able to thrive for these 18,000 years because he was surrounded by these positive virtues aiding him in his task. Associating the animals to the creation story allows the reader to associate these essential virtues to their everyday lives.

These human character traits attributed to the animals in the myth are essential in the process of being an honest, virtuous person. We see these virtues in Confucianism teachings later in the history of China, around 500 B.C. Three major Confucian beliefs are Yi (fairness), Xin (Honesty and Trustworthiness), and Jen (humaneness towards one another). These Confucian ideals parallel with the significance of the animals in the myth. The Chinese people adopted these virtues because by being fair, honest, and humane, the general outcome will be positive energy (dragon), happiness (qilin), prosperity (turtle), and positive, working relationships between women and men. In China today, Confucian principles are still followed, taking a more modern consideration to women's rights and equality in society. Lisa Li-Hsiang, a Confucian scholar, is the pioneer of an emerging movement for "Confucian feminism.' (Li-Hsiang, 2007) Confucianism's inherent gender inequality regarding interactions between men and women has been the biggest criticism for the belief system. The modernization of Confucianism or taking old Confucianist ideals "with a grain of salt" could better society by filtering out the unethical ideas from the ethical ones. If this legendary belief system has a chance of surviving, it will do so only in the hands of a modern free thinker like Li-Hsiang. It is important to uphold traditions like the Pangu myth and Confucianist ideals, but it is even more important to find an appropriate balance or equality for everyone involved.

Pangu would not have been able to survive if it was not for his natural-born sense of balance, known otherwise as Yin-Yang. This creation story was first recorded in the 13th Century but takes place in 2333 B.C., far before its interpretation in the Tao Te Ching of the Daoist religion (Kim, 2014). Setting the creation story so far in the past allows for a greater history of Yin-Yang, showing its ancient wisdom and attributing some long-lasting dependibility to the ideal. In the Pangu myth, either side of the shell represents Yin and Yang. Pangu's natural understanding of Yin-Yang allowed for the separation of the two, solving the perpetual chaos before the split. Pangu understood they must be separated in order to bring peace. This myth helped to popularise the idea of Yin-Yang, later being adopted by Daoism as a belief system. Daoism followers continue the legacy by worshipping Pangu in Temple to this very day. The symbolism and modern-day representations in Confucianism teachings of the Pangu myth only strengthen the timeless aspects of the myth.

The Korean Creation Myth - Dangun

The Korean Creation Myth begins by describing a being named Hwanin, the "sky god", who lived in the Heavens. His son, Hwanung, yearned to live on Earth, and was allowed (along with 3000 followers) to live on Earth and found Sinsi, or the "City of God". While on Earth, Hwanung met a Bear and a Tiger who wanted to become human. Hwanung told them if they could live in a cave for 100 days on a diet of garlic and Mugwort, then he would grant their wish. The Tiger lost in twenty days and was told to roam in the mountains and protect the village, which proved the challenge to be a difficult one. Regardless, The Bear survives and is turned into a beautiful woman named Ungnyeo, or "Bear Woman". Ungnyeo begged for a child, so Hwanung turned into a human in order to procreate. Their son was named "Dangun", who grew up and founded the capital city called Pyongyang, and ruled the kingdom he called the Joseon kingdom for 1,500 years until his death (Kang, 2006). Dangun, meaning 'Altar Prince' or 'Sandalwood', is a powerful, subtle reference to the origin story of Korea. It shows again the uniting of animal and human elements that are responsible for the creation of the world, supporting the original motivations behind writing the creation myth.

Hwanung’s journey to Earth allowed the sky to join with the earthly creatures, creating unique examples of symbolism that teach humble lessons. The joining the Heavens and the Earth is a key example of symbolism that is a describing trait of a myth. Similarly to the Chinese myth, there is a defining moment in which the Heavens are joined with the Earth: Pangu breaking the egg and the birth of Dangun. The Bear - often associated with strong femininity in Korean culture - survived the trials and tribulation of surviving in a cave with a diet of only mugwort and garlic. Mugwort and garlic are two spices that are only used as complementary flavors in dishes, making it impossible to survive off of for 100 days. Park Sang Un argues that the mugwort and garlic are a testament to modern-day unhealthy diets, saying, “...the civilized world that awaits the bear-woman is just a patriarchal world that imposes fixed roles on women.” (Un, 2007) Un is correct in saying that the world the Bear was assimilated into was a patriarchal one. I agree with this criticism of the myth, however, it is not substantial enough to fully discredit the positive meaning behind the myth. Having the Bear eat mugwort and garlic was supposed to be a difficult task, which proved the strength of the animal. The delicacy of these herbs reflects on the gentle nature of femininity

The symbols’ importance is seen today in a more modern interpretation of the beloved myths. For example, at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, the two Korean mascots were Soohorang and Bandabi, a tiger and a bear. These mascots are frequently used at these sort of events, intentionally referencing the historic symbolism in the Dangun creation myth. The mascot is said to resemble strength and independence which is the same meaning the tiger holds in the creation myth. The Bear mascot is perfectly described by Lee Hee-gon, head of the mascot company Mass C&G, in saying, 'Bandabi has a big heart full of warmth. His merits are strong will, endurance, and courage. Also, she is trustworthy with a solid personality.” (Oh, 2018) Unlike Un, Oh chooses to stick to the more positive side of the bear’s symbolism. The bear’s resilience in the cave and resemblance of strong femininity have remained consistent throughout all of the histories of Korea, speaking as a testament to the importance of the creation myth.

Conclusion

After evaluating the claims made by Ro regarding the Pangu and Dangun myth, it is ludicrous to reject these myths as creation myths. The lessons and themes attached to these myths parallel to the creation and intention of upholding a proper, functioning society. The character development virtues seen in the symbolism of animals, Yin-Yang, and modern Confucian ideals are enough representation to establish the myths as positive historical tales providing the essential virtues of a moral being. The delicate representation of women in the Dangun myth should be taken with an open mind, allowing the reader to interpret women as both a treasure and an independent, strong being.