

**SOAS-AKS**  
**Working Papers in Korean Studies**

*No. 13*

**BIRTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF HEROES  
IN THE WAR HERO NOVELS**

Lim, Chikyun

December 2009



## **Births and Achievements of Heroes in the War Hero Novels**

**Lim, Chikyun**

The Academy of Korean Studies, Korea

© 2009

### **1. Introduction**

During the latter half of the Joseon dynasty, great quantities of romance novels were produced of protagonists with exalted lineage and parents of old-aged couples from great families suffered hardships in the secular world but ultimately overcame all sufferings and triumphed via their actions in war. These seemed to have been very popular among the people of those times. Not only is the number of existing novels great, but the popularity of these novels can be confirmed by the great number of variations of each novel made.

Researchers today refer to these novels about as heroic novels or war novels. The term "heroic novels" is based on the structure of the so-called "biographies of heroes."<sup>1</sup> In contrast, war novels were created with the materials of "war".

The structure of "biographies of heroes," which was used by Cho Dong-il as the basis for prescribing heroic novels, did not especially concern "war" itself. The function of "whether hardships were overcome or not" was more important. The problems to be overcome did not have to be due to war. As a result, *The Story of Sukhyang*, *The Story of Chunhyang*, etc. could be included in the category of heroic novels.<sup>2</sup> Serious questions can be raised about the characteristics of the "hero" in such cases. A hero, according to Seo Dae-suk, is someone who puts priority on the values of the group and realizes it.<sup>3</sup> In that case, it is stretching the truth a little to call those who pursue individual happiness, such as *Sukhyang* and *Chunhyang*, as heroes.

On the one hand, there are limitations to war novels, which were named thusly due to the inclusion of "war" in the plot. First, there does not seem to be any room for considering the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Biographies of heroes" was organized by Cho Dong-il, and its contents are as follows. The protagonists: 1) were of noble lineage; 2) were conceived or born in extraordinary ways; 3) had superior abilities different from the villains; 4) were foundlings and came close to death; 5) were saved and taken in by foster parents; 6) grew to adulthood only to face danger again; 7) became victors by overcoming hardships through combat (Cho Dong-il, "A Life of a Hero, and the Dev" elopment of History of Literature," Donga Munhwa. Volume 10, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Two novels are considered to be included in the category of war hero novels in the dissertation mentioned above.

<sup>3</sup> Seo Dae-suk, "Development and Metamorphosis of Novels about Heroes," *Issues on the History of Novels from Antiquity*, Jipmundang, 1993, p. 331.

scope of the structural aspects in the term "war novels."

If only "war in the plot" were the basis for naming things, there is the danger of extensions of these novels becoming very broad. For example, wars were related to family issues, and thus, appeared as a very important theme in sequence novels. In these instances, it is questionable as to whether these novels can be distinguished as war novels. Seo Dae-suk uses the term "war novels" in an effort to overcome these questions, but he attempts to divide them into categories based on the consequential structure of each novel.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it can be said that the academic world today silently agrees with the fact that the category of "war novels" also includes works with themes of war among heroic novels.

Viewed in this way, currently utilized heroic novels and ordinary war novels share some elements in common but include individual novels that are pertinent only their own domain as well. According to the arguments of these researchers, *The Story of Yu Chung-nyeol* can be a heroic story as well as an ordinary war story, but *The Story of Chunhyang* may be a heroic story but it cannot be an ordinary war story.

This article cannot deal with all of these works. Therefore, this article deals with novels that are included in the structure of "biographies of heroes", and simultaneously, where war appears as a method of overcoming hardships, i.e., works that are heroic novels and war novels, at the same time. These will be referred to as war hero novels. Among Korea's novels, war hero novels are one type that focus on extraordinary lineage.

War hero novels in Korea generally are composed of three parts: the birth of the hero, his triumphs in many hardships he encountered with, and consequence and death of a hero. Two major pivots of hero are his unusual birth and survival of many sufferings is emphasized in these novels for us to understand hero.

The hero has an unusual birth, which sets of background of why he is able to overcome many trials he may encounter. Since he has an unusual birth, he equally is able to exercise his unusual strength in this life, and enjoys a happy life.

War hero novels were the most popular group of literary works, especially during the latter part of the Joseon dynasty. Thus, it is inferred that the supernatural births utilized in these works gained much sympathy from the readers of those days. The suggestiveness of dreams foretelling births to Koreans of today as well, the majority of whom are born with, is thought to be not insignificant.

---

<sup>4</sup> Seo Dae-suk, *Structure and Background of War novels*, Ewha Women's University Publications, 1985.

## **2. Aspects and Meanings of Supernatural Births of Protagonists in War Hero Novels.**

It has already been ascertained by Cho Dong-il's research that the structure of "biographies of heroes" is based on "the myth of King Dongmyeong," which is the myth on founding the nation of Goguryeo.

This raises a question.

War hero novels were a type of novel created during the Joseon dynasty, but Goguryeo had already disappeared into history by that time. As we all know, the myths of fallen nations cannot be passed down with vitality from generation to generation. In reality, Goguryeo collapsed before Unified Silla came into existence. Then how was it possible for the structure of the myth on founding Goguryeo to survive in the literature of the Joseon dynasty.

The reason can be found in Goryeo. Goryeo claimed that it succeeded Goguryeo. Because of this, the myth on founding Goguryeo could be passed on with vitality from Goguryeo to Goryeo to Joseon. The situation of the latter half of the Goryeo dynasty, which inherited the myth on founding Goguryeo, can be found in Yi Kyu-bo's preface in *Saga of King Dongmyeong*.

King Dongmyeong's extraordinary deeds were much discussed in the world, to the degree that even foolish men and women of low birth could talk about him.<sup>5</sup>

We can know the myth on founding Goguryeo had vitality until the latter half of Goryeo if we take into consideration that all, even foolish men and women of low birth, knew of the extraordinary achievements of King Dongmyeong. I would think such are the clues that can explain the reason for war hero novels created during the Joseon dynasty being based on the structure of "the myth of King Dongmyeong."

The protagonists' process of birth as shown in war hero novels is as follows:

- 1) old-aged couple from a great family
- 2) no successors
- 3) prayer for a child
- 4) a dream of forthcoming conception(a dream that one is going to get pregnant.)
- 5) supernatural birth
- 6) heroic temperament

This process is as described below when a general narrative is applied.

---

<sup>5</sup> 世多說東明王神異之事雖愚夫婦亦頗能說其事. Yi Kyu-bo. "Saga of King Dongmyeong," *Collected Works of Minister Yi of Korea*, Vol. 3.

An old-aged couple from a traditional renowned family lamented about their lack of a child to carry on the family name; they prayed for a child, and a child was conceived after having a dream of forthcoming conception. A heavenly maid came down to earth to assist the birth (or the birth room was filled with scent) when the child was ready to be born on the 10th month (depending on the novel, it can be as long as the 20th month). The child was extraordinary from its birth.

The most important thing here is a dream of forthcoming conception. A dream of forthcoming conception is the transition point from being without a child to being with a child. In war hero novels, dreams of forthcoming conceptions were utilized in the births of heroic protagonists in order to endow those personages who could only be born in human-human relationships with supernaturalness. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the content of those dreams of forthcoming conceptions.

Eagerly awaiting for an answer to her prayers, she saw five-colored clouds appearing one day, and a hermit who held an official position came down riding a blue dragon. He said, "I am the hermit who conquered blue dragons. Ik-song was evil, and he was sent back to his hometown when the Lord of Heaven was informed of his misdeeds. But Ik-song harbored a grudge and picked a fight with me at a party at the multi-storied jade building. Consequently, We were expelled to the world of mortals. I did not know where to go, but the spirit of Mount Namak commanded me to go to your house. Please take pity on me." The hermit said to the dragon, "I'll look for you again later," and sent it away into the five-colored cloud. Then he ran into the lady's bosom. The lady was startled and woke up to find out that it was a dream.<sup>6</sup>

A child wearing blue clothes came in, bowed deeply, and said, "I am the son of the king of the South Sea. I escorted my father to the heavenly palace and committed a sin by competing with Taebaek... I was expelled from there and did not know where to go, but luckily, the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva of Choonglim Temple by the South Sea instructed me to come here. So here I am."<sup>7</sup>

From the sky came down a little child wearing blue clothes and surrounded by clouds and mist, paid obeisance, and said, "I am the son of the king of the East Sea. I sinned against the Lord of the Heaven and thus was sent down to earth. I had nowhere to go, but the Golden

---

<sup>6</sup> Kim Dong-uk, "The Story of Yu Ch'ung-nyol," Collection of Gyongin Ancient Novels, in Woodblock, Vol. 2. Humanities Research Institute. 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Ki-dong. "The Story of Kwak Hae-ryong," Collection of Ancient Novels in Print-Type, Vol. 1. Asia Publishers, 1976.

Buddha sent me here."<sup>8</sup>

Many more war hero novels aside from those mentioned above, such as *The Story of Chang Ik-song*, *The Story of Hong Gye-wol*, *The Story of General Wang*, *The Story of Chang Kuk-jin*, etc., show similar aspects of dreams of forthcoming conceptions.

These dreams all have a common narrative: "I am so-and-so, was invaded by so-and-so, and came to your house by the command of so-and-so." However, the parents were all passive. They just received what was given to them and had no choice in the matter. This is the reason that the parents were all old-aged couples. It was difficult for old-aged couples to conceive babies on their own in the Joseon dynasty. Old-aged couples simply lent their bodies for the births of the protagonists. They could not show any reaction to the personages sent by the object of their devout prayers. Old-aged couples were utilized in the novels to make clear that the heroism of the protagonists in the novels was not endowed with the parents' divinity as in earlier myths or legends but were endowed with something else. The supernaturalness of the protagonists was endowed through dreams of forthcoming conceptions.

In the above examples of narratives on dreams of forthcoming conceptions, the protagonists were all heavenly beings or related to heavenly beings prior to coming down to the world of mortals. Protagonists with heavenly bloodlines can be seen in the myths on founding nations. If that is the case, is there a connection between the protagonists' heavenly bloodlines in war hero novels and myths on founding nations? A clue to the answer to this question can be found in the fact that the basic structure of war hero novels is based on "biographies of heroes" as can be seen in "the myth of King Dongmyeong." As commonly known, it can be said that King Dongmyeong preserved the heavenly bloodline naturally, because he is the son of Haemosu, son of the Lord of Heaven. Such an aspect of "the myth of King Dongmyeong" is inferred to have influenced war hero novels.

Parents of the protagonists could not be established as god-like beings in the period prior to the 18th century when war hero novels came into existence. Dreams of forthcoming conceptions were already universally accepted in births of great personages. Thus, war hero novels probably had to apply dreams of forthcoming conceptions of the protagonist to appear "specious" to the general audience. However, as observed in previous pages, the method of births of historically great personages to be accompanied by dreams of forthcoming conceptions was not enough to clearly state that the protagonists are from supernatural bloodlines. In order to supplement this, the origins of the protagonists were directly expressed in dreams of forthcoming conceptions through the personification of a constellation, a son of the dragon king, or heavenly maid in

---

<sup>8</sup> "The Story of Oryong," "Collection in Print-Type," Vol. 4.

order for the heavenly image to be brought into relief in war hero novels. Dreams of forthcoming conceptions, which were universally acknowledged in those days, were utilized to remove any accusations of "unbelievable events," and the original form of a hero was not broken at the same time. Heavenly images of dreams of forthcoming conceptions in war hero novels were one other than a fictitious substitute for the mythically divine.<sup>9</sup>

A very important controversy emerges here. Up until now it has been generally agreed that protagonists imbued with "influential and distinguished family" connections in war hero novels are related to exalted lineages emerging from mythical heroes.<sup>10</sup> However, when dreams of forthcoming conceptions that clearly identify the protagonists as heavenly beings are taken into consideration, there is room for reconsidering such an interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

There is no collective relation between the distinguished families in the novels and births of the protagonists. The protagonists were born through dreams of forthcoming conceptions based on devout prayers and not because the protagonists' families were distinguished. As previously explained, the parents of the world of mortals just passively accepted the protagonists. Nowhere could it be found that the distinguished families were the source of births.

Moreover, it is necessary for us to first consider the fact that "extraordinary lineage" endowed heroism to the protagonists. If distinguished families were the transformation of "noble lineage," the protagonists in war hero novels must have been endowed with heroism due to the lineage of distinguished families. But distinguished families in war hero novels did not endow the protagonists with heroism. Distinguished families in the novels were nothing more than the environment through which heavenly beings entered the world of mortals at the instruction of transcendental directors. Ultimately, there is no connection between distinguished families and the noble lineage of the protagonists.

Then why were distinguished families established as the background for the births of the protagonists? My thoughts on this are that the background of distinguished families is nothing more than a literary device that merely maximized the hardships of the protagonists.

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are instances where just the dreams foretelling births appear (*The Tale of Hong Giltong* and *The Story of Yi Dae-bong*), or do not appear at all (*The Story of Cho Ung*, *The Story of Yu Mun-song*, and *The Story of Kwon Ik-choong*) in war hero novels. However, there are instances where the authors merely produced works with such themes in the beginning and did not think deeply of their abilities if the theme of the novels mostly originated from folklore or a collective group. Simply utilizing dreams foretelling births applies to this case. In contrast, in works without dreams foretelling births, the fact that protagonists have noble bloodlines of heavenly origin was brought to light in the process of describing their deeds and so coincides with the argument of this article that protagonists in war hero novels have heavenly bloodlines. For more detailed discussions, see Lim Chi-kyun, "Research on war hero novels-Focusing on Birth and Strife," M.A. Dissertation, Seoul National University, 1985, pp. 52-56.

<sup>10</sup> In *Theories of Korean Novels* (Knowledge Industry Company, 1977) by Cho Dong-il, "parents were of distinguished royal blood" in war hero novels was substituted with "the hero is of distinguished bloodline." And in *Structure and Background of War novels*, Ewha Women's University Publications, 1985, Seo Dae-suk claims that the protagonists born of distinguished families were influenced by noble lineage from myth.

<sup>11</sup> I generated a new interpretation about this a while ago (Lim Chi-kyun, "Research on Heroic War novels-Focusing on Birth and Strife," M.A. Dissertation, Seoul National University, 1985). The interpretation in this article is based on the said work.

After the protagonists were born in war hero novels, the distinguished families were ruined for whatever reason, thereby putting the protagonists in a difficult position. The readers would feel compassion for the protagonists when the protagonists, who were expected to lead happy lives due to having heavenly bloodlines and being born into distinguished families, were placed in unimaginable hardships because of the downfall of their families. The fact that the protagonists were the only sons who were begot with difficulty after devout prayer may result in increasing the compassion of the readers. Thus, the readers would have felt pity for the protagonists who suffered hardships and would scrutinize the protagonists' achievements throughout their lifetime. Maximization of these hardships ultimately resulted in dramatizing the actions of the protagonists who overcame hardship. This literary device that is achieved with difficulty is the power that made it possible for war hero novels to be the type of novel that contained the most popular and commercial characteristics among the novels of the late Joseon dynasty.

### **3. Hardships and Achievements of Protagonists in War Hero Novels**

The general commonality among the protagonists of classic Korean novels is that they always overcome the trials and tribulations they face and live happily ever after. Classic Korean novels are inclined toward "happy endings." It has already been ascertained that the "happy endings" in these kinds of classic novels are closely related to the consciousness of the Korean people.<sup>12</sup>

War hero novels are no exception. Usually, the ending of these novels shows a hero succeeding in a war and enjoying glorious life after.

The hero lives a life of disadvantage until a war starts. Though he was born with unusual family lineage line, he is set in a situation of having no relatives in the world. According to different novels, sometimes the hero passes the service examination, which may have him to have some advantages, but he still has to stand up by himself. He is not able to obtain any power of to be able to achieve his lifetime goals until the war happens. Participating in war, he is finally able to prove himself. These novels are similarly conceived, so it is hard to tell one from another.

In these war hero novels, although the hero is born in unusual situation, he overcomes several trials. Then he is able to succeed in war and finally joins the league of power with glory. In parts about trials, there are reasons and how the hero overcame the trials. The latter consists of the first triumph and the second triumph. In the first triumph, a hero succeeds temporarily and then in the second triumph, he succeeds completely. War normally serves as a background for his second triumph. In the first triumph, the hero survives the crises and finds a temporary

---

<sup>12</sup> Seo Dae-suk, "Happy Endings in Classic Novels and the Consciousness of the Korean People," *Gwanak Linguistics Research*, Vol. 3, 1978. Seo In-suk, *The Structures of Ending in Classic Novels and Their Worldview*. M.A. Dissertation, Seoul National University, 1984.

peace. In the second triumph, the hero saves the country from crises by building merits in the war and is recognized by the king, thus is able to join the highest power ranking.

Reasons why the hero suffers are diverse. They can be his father's defeat in party factions, deaths of both his parents and separation from his relatives in the war and so forth. Above all, the collapse of one's family clan can be the most destructive reason for the hero's suffering as he almost loses everything.

For the first triumph, rescuers can be his father's friend, an immortal, or a sage. The common point is that they all enable the hero to find back some temporary peace.

In the second triumph, situations are always related to the country; it is in war with another country, invaded by another nation, or has rebellions within the country. The hero appears and solves these problems. Eventually, the king recognizes his merits.

In the end, the war became a means for the hero to achieve his life goals.

In reality, it is rare to see that someone without parents and bases of life to triumph over all the diversities and then live a happy life. So war is utilized to create an extreme situation, and to support the theme, there are always dreams of forthcoming conceptions.

Supernatural bloodline verified by dreams of forthcoming conceptions justified transcendental assistance when the protagonists suffered hardships later, and endowed the protagonists with heroism. Also, towards the end of the novels it was natural for the protagonists to become victors in wars where nations might be destroyed and changed. The authors of war hero novels once more emphasized the status of the protagonists, i.e., that the protagonists were heavenly beings, in order to do this. Through war, the images of the protagonists in war hero novels transitioned from individuals to collective heroes who put importance on the protection and realization of the values of their respective groups first. Achievement in war can be regarded as a means for personal advancement. However, in the instances where the protagonists in war hero novels fought in wars, the fate of the nations depended on the outcome. It is true that the protagonists achieved personal

glory in these wars, but the protagonists were definitely heroes who protected the values and ideas of the groups from the viewpoint of the organization of the groups. This is the real image of a hero.

#### **4. Hero's Dream of Forthcoming Conception, his Achievements, and their Contemporary Meaning in Korea**

People in Korea who talk to a pregnant woman today frequently ask, "what kind of dream did you have when you became pregnant?" Moreover, they might listen to the content of the dream with much seriousness and interest. And the gender of the unborn child is sometimes inferred from the content of the dream.

In reality, most of the people in Korea know of "their own dreams of forthcoming conceptions" and endow those dreams with meaning. Dreams of forthcoming conceptions are in fact the result of supernatural lineage bestowed on mythical heroes that transform with the times handed down from generation to generation. But dreams of forthcoming conceptions that were endowed on great personages in the past are extended to common people of Korea today as omens of birth.

The moment that a device for a specific individual or group circulates as a model of precedence or regulations, it becomes the property of all people. Moreover, it becomes something public and conventional. Proliferation of dreams of forthcoming conceptions can probably be explained thusly.

Of course, we cannot possibly ignore the dissemination of these dreams due to the parents' affections for and expectations of their children. The hope that their children will leave great achievements behind is also inherent, because their children came into this world accompanied by dreams of forthcoming conceptions, as did great personages in myths. However, when taken into consideration that Korean people are very interested in others' dreams of forthcoming conceptions and discuss them, we can be convinced that the dissemination of dreams of forthcoming conceptions is not achieved merely on the individual level. At least two forms of consciousness can be grasped here.

First is egalitarianism of human beings.

Dreams of forthcoming conceptions appeared as indications of births of great personages. When this is open to all, it ultimately results in the thinking that anyone can become great. Egalitarianism is opening the same possibility to everyone at birth, the starting point for all.

Second is humanism.

Men and women having children through physical union is a scientific thought. Despite the fact that men and women can have physical union at any time, a child is not conceived every time this happens. People who believe in dreams of forthcoming conceptions believe their children to be chosen. Because they are chosen, dreams of forthcoming conceptions are seen as notices of birth. The thinking that human beings are not born into this world at random but are chosen is the culmination of humanism.<sup>13</sup> In war hero novels, it is normal to see a middle-aged

---

<sup>13</sup> Korean people consider a newly born baby to be one year old. Ten months spent inside the mother's stomach is acknowledged as life even though the baby could not be seen. This is also one way to express humanism.

or old couple that is considered to have no reproductive abilities to give birth of a hero. And so this means a birth of a hero is chosen by the heaven.

Dreams of forthcoming conceptions that contain such consciousness are educationally useful as well. The possibility that children think about themselves one more time when they hear about dreams foretelling births related to their own births from their parents is very high.

Seen from this point of view, the tradition of supernatural lineage is alive even today.

Overcoming trials is also considered a part of modern Korean's consciousness. Koreans do not give up easily when things do not go well. Moreover, Koreans believe that even if I suffer now, my later generations will be able to live well. Naturally, Koreans cherish hopes for the future while living in difficulties. Koreans built 'the wonder on Han river' through the difficult times in 1960's, and fared well in the IMF crisis. During these processes, Koreans also believe in " If I do my best, This person must be someone who can save me from difficulties". This kind of thinking has always been in Korean classical novels. The war hero novels are just some extreme cases shown. Korean classical novels including war hero novels all show such a motif that happiness was in the end achieved through overcoming many difficulties. And this belief is also with modern Koreans.

What else cannot be overcome by Koreans who were born with dreams of forthcoming conceptions?