

21. EXPLORING KOREA'S CREATION MYTH

GRADE LEVEL: 6-8

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SUBJECT: Language Arts and Social Studies

TIME REQUIRED: 2-4 class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Perform Korea's creation myth as a play.
2. Explain the symbolic significance of the details in the myth.
3. Describe the aspects of ancient Korean religion and culture.
4. Identify historical facts and influences.
5. Explore how the mythic message continues to unite Koreans.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Copies of the play, *The Birth of Tan-gun*; Appendix 1, Questions for Discussion or Independent Work; and Appendix 2, Supplementary Activities
- Reference materials on Korean Shamanism, mountain spirits, and folk paintings

BACKGROUND:

Myths seek to answer the primal questions of what it is to be human. How did we arrive here? Why is there evil in the world? What happens when we die? Who controls the universe? Myths have a timeless appeal because they speak of human truths.

It is fascinating to study the role a myth has played throughout time in a particular culture. Every culture has a creation myth to explain how the world, humans, and animals came into existence. Korea's creation myth, Tan-gun, has survived over the centuries because its sacred message continues to unite modern people. This lesson was designed to help students identify and understand the mythic message of Tan-gun. They will also become familiar with other aspects of Korean culture.

Nature Worship: Most East Asian deities desired earth's beauty. Earth was not conceptualized as a bad place.

Shamanism: Korea's only indigenous religion is Shamanism, but it is connected to the beliefs of tribes in Siberia. Shamanism is the belief that everything in nature has a spirit. The human world and the spirit world must be in harmony. A shaman has the ability to communicate with the spirit world. At the beginning of the play, Tan-gun's father speaks of various spirits such as the rain, the wind, and the clouds that will assist his son on earth.

Historical and Cultural Implications: According to the myth, Tan-gun founded Choson in 2333 BCE. Interestingly, historians also use that date as the beginning of the nation. However, the first people to settle in the Korean peninsula were probably from the Ural Altaic region. Archaeologists have discovered artifacts in Korea that reflect the beliefs of Siberian Shamanism. Numerous golden crowns that have been found in Asian tombs have artistic motif those worn by shamans. For example, Tan-gun was born under a birch tree. Some tribes in Siberia believe that the birch tree is like the sacred World Tree in Norse mythology. The marriage of Tan-gun's parents may be interpreted as the union of two different tribes that ultimately create a new kingdom. Tan-gun's father's heavenly origin contrasts with his mother's ancestry as bear. David A. Mason, author of *Spirit of the Mountains*,

thinks this may be understood as a Heaven-worshipping tribe (invaders from Siberia?) absorbing a less-developed bear totem tribe (in ancient Manchuria).

Mountain God, Mountain Spirit, or *San-Shin*: A mountain is a powerful symbol because it is where earth meets heaven. Mountains cover nearly 70 percent of the Korean landscape. In ancient times people viewed each mountain as having its own distinctive mountain spirit, mountain god, or *San-Shin*. Throughout the centuries Korean folk paintings of the mountain spirit have changed to visually reflect the various philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism. Although the folk paintings' look has altered to suit the religious ideas in vogue, a specific set of icons has remained true. For example, it is rare for a folk painting of a mountain spirit (usually an elderly man with a white beard) not to be accompanied by a tiger. At the end of his rule, it is implied that Tan-gun decides to become a mountain god or a *San-Shin*. In Asian religions important figures often retreat into the mountains for a great spiritual journey. As a mountain spirit, Tan-gun will live for eternity guiding and helping his people. Today the mountain spirit is still worshiped by some Koreans.

Traditional and Modern Values: The values of the ancient Koreans are still easily observed in modern Korea. The bear achieves her goal of becoming human through patience and perseverance. She then gives birth to Tan-gun. However, it is interesting that the tiger is the animal that dominates Korean folk tales and artwork. The ancient people respected the tiger's place in nature as the ruler of the mountain. In times of invasion, the tiger has inspired Koreans. A tiger symbolizes strength, ferociousness, craftiness, and speed.

Pride: Sometimes the myth's interpretation has created a nationalist feeling. Some Koreans have viewed Tan-gun as the father of their nation. These Koreans have interpreted the myth to mean that all Koreans are descendants of Tan-gun. This helps to promote pride in their very homogeneous population. Despite numerous invasions over the centuries, Koreans are proud of their homogeneity and rich unique traditions. Citizenship may only be claimed at birth if the child's father is a Korean citizen.

PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce the lesson by leading a discussion on the role myths play in ancient and modern cultures. How do they share or reflect important cultural information? Students should have a basic understanding of the use of symbols and figurative language in myths.
2. Share the ideas in the background information section with students. The information can be disseminated in a lecture with class notes, researched in cooperative learning groups, or explored in art projects. It is essential to show students visuals of ancient Korean culture to help them imagine the time period. For example, books on the mountain spirit will quickly help students identify various icons and symbols.
3. Before performing the play, select some questions from Appendix 1 and write them on the chalkboard. These guiding questions should help assess the students' understanding of the basic plot as well as the mythic message.
4. Students should perform the play. At various points, students should be asked literal and critical thinking questions to assure the message and the cultural elements in the play are being comprehended.
5. Students should then complete the questions in Appendix 1.
6. (Optional) Assign the questions in Appendix 2.

EVALUATION:

Observations of students during classroom discussions may be assessed. Students' written work in answering the questions in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 will be assessed for depth and clarity.

ENRICHMENT:

Encourage the students to rewrite the play so it includes more aspects of Korean culture. Direct students to create various props to make the play come alive. Assign students to research other characters in Korean mythology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Note: Many of the book sources include incredible photographs and illustrations that beautifully portray important elements in the lesson. An “*” refers to works that were especially useful in preparing this lesson.

- *Covell, Alan Carter. *Folk Art and Magic*. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1986.
- Covell, Jon Carter. *Korea's Cultural Roots*. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1981.
- In-Sob, Zong, ed. *Folk Tales from Korea*. 3rd ed. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1982.
- *Manson, David A. *Spirit of the Mountains*. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1999.
- Nahm, Andrew C., ed. *I Love Korea*. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1991.

Web Sources:

- *<http://koreanhistoryproject.org/Ket/Idx/KETIndex0000.htm>
- <http://ccsun7.sogang.ac.kr/~burns/cult951/tangun.html>
- <http://ccsun7.sogang.ac.kr/~burns/cult951/founding.html>

THE BIRTH OF TAN-GUN

The play is based on William Caraway's story.

[SCENE ONE]

- Narrator One: Every culture has a myth to explain how the world and humans were created. The Birth of Tan-gun is based on Korea's creation myth. Each year on October 3 Koreans celebrate National Foundation Day, which commemorates the day when Tan-gun founded the Korean nation.
- Narrator Two: This myth begins a long, long, long, time ago. Some say this was the time when animals could speak like humans. And still, many things were not created yet. Hwan-in, Lord of Heaven, rules the eastern sky where morning is born each day. On this particular day, he is anxiously awaiting a visit from his only son, Hwan-ung. (*Hwan-ung enters and bows to his father.*)
- Hwan-in: (*Slowly*) Ah, dear son, it is so good to see you. I asked you to visit me this morning for an important reason. I have thought about this moment so many times since your birth. All parents—(*He pauses.*) even gods—have mixed feelings about the day their child leaves home to seek his own destiny.
- Hwan-ung: (*Reserved*) Yes, great Father, I am ready to leave this glorious kingdom, but...
- Hwan-in: (*Interrupting*) Son, you need not explain. I often hear your thoughts. Your desire is pure and your time has come. Yes, I know how much you want to walk along the slopes of mountains and swim in the rivers on earth. You do have my blessing to build a new kingdom on earth. Perhaps you will choose a beautiful land in the east. Yes, I do love the lands in the east!
- Hwan-ung: Is that why you were chosen to be the god of the eastern sky? I always thought it was because you were such a morning person!
- Hwan-in: (*Laughing*) Perhaps you will settle there. We must finish this serious conversation. Like all children who leave home, you WILL miss your life in heaven. However, I believe that your new life on earth will bring you much honor and happiness.
- Hwan-ung: Father, thank you for your blessing. Ever since I can remember, I have dreamed to live on earth and start a new nation.
- Hwan-in: I will not be sending you alone. Three divine spirits will accompany you.

Hwan-ung: Father, do I know them?

Hwan-in: Yes, yes, you've met them before at some of my parties. They are the very ones who control the clouds, the winds, and the rains. *(Pauses)* This is a serious undertaking. Just to be safe, I will also send 3,000 additional spirits from heaven to accompany you.

Hwan-ung: I will not bring you any dishonor, great Father.

Hwan-in: Precious, son, I have faith in you, but the extra help may come in handy. Humans and animals are a tricky combination. They will need an incredible amount of guidance.

Hwan-ung: Father, I will strive to be a great ruler who looks after his people. I will also create a special city on earth.

[SCENE TWO]

Narrator One: A few days later Hwan-ung descended from heaven to Mount T'aebaeksan. Under the shade of a birch tree, he created a new city and spoke to his followers.

Hwan-ung: *(Confidently)* Gentle people: the spot on this beautiful mountain peak shall be known as Shinshi. *(Applause from loyal subjects.)*

Loyal Subjects: Oh, Great Hwan-ung, please tell us what Shinshi means?

Hwan-ung: It means the city of God. Good people, my father has taught me the ways of a just ruler. You need not worry. My helpers from heaven and I will teach you all the important lessons about life.

[SCENE THREE]

Narrator Two: Hwan-ung kept his promise to his father and his people. In the following years, Shinshi, the city of God, prospered. Hwan-ung taught his loyal subjects about practical and spiritual matters. He was revered as a wise ruler who often listened to the prayers of his people. One afternoon a bear and a tiger paid him a surprise visit.

Hwan-ung: Don't be shy. Please move forward. Yes, yes-- stand closer to the front of my throne so I can see your faces. Good. Now, tell me why you have sought my attention.

Bear: Good afternoon, great Hwan-ung. Thank you for agreeing to speak

with us. I want to be a human more than anything else! I am willing to do whatever it takes. Please consider my...

Tiger: *(Interrupting in a loud booming voice.)* Oh, mighty Hwan-ung, son of the Lord of the Heavens, thank you for speaking with us. I, too, greatly desire to be a human.

Hwan-ung: *(Clearing his throat.)* As you know, I always listen to the prayers of my people. So I have heard your prayers many times from the cave that you both share. I suppose many things are possible when you combine a desire with hard work. Yes, there is a way to become human. But do you understand what it will mean to live as a human?

Tiger and Bear: *(Excitedly)* YES! YES!

Hwan-ung: Do you understand that they have foolish ways, which often lead them to experience much sorrow?

Tiger: *(Excitedly)* No, I mean YES, YES!

Bear: *(Eagerly)* YES!

Hwan-ung: My dear ones – this will not be an easy task. You must suffer and show great patience in order for the miraculous transformation to take place.

Tiger: Nothing can stop me! I can quickly conquer any challenge.

Bear: I will endure the hard work if it means becoming human.

Hwan-ung: *(Sternly)* Listen closely. You must follow my instructions exactly in order to become a human. Your quest will begin immediately. First, you must stay in your cave for 100 days. Second, the only food permitted inside the cave is what I am about to give you. Here are 20 cloves of garlic and some mugwort. In order to be successful, you must stay focused on your goal.

[SCENE FOUR]

- Narrator One: Life in the cave was uneventful until the twentieth day.
- Tiger: *(Moaning)* I can't do this anymore. Cave life is making me CRAZY! Life without sunlight is d-e-p-r-e-s-s-i-n-g and the smell of garlic is disgusting. *(Roaring)* I am starving. If I don't eat some meat soon, I am going to be a dead human at day 100.
- Bear: *(In a soothing voice)* Tiger, be patient. You can do it. You must do what Hwan-ung said. Focus on your goal of becoming a human. It will feel so good to be a man. After you're a man, you won't even remember this uncomfortable situation. What is a 100 days without meat in comparison to life as a human?
- Tiger: *(Somewhat testily)* YOU don't understand. Every year you hibernate in a cave. You know the routine. You've had plenty of practice. Going without sunlight and food is easy for bears. *(Wailing loudly)* I am a tiger. Tigers need action. Tigers like to hunt. I am starving. I want some meat-NOW. *(He roars.)* I can't survive another 80 days. My friend, may you last the 100 days. *(Sadly)* Goodbye.

[SCENE FIVE]

- Narrator Two: The Bear missed her friend terribly, but she was determined to reach her goal of becoming human. She spent incredible amounts of time praying and imagining her life as a human. Finally, her perseverance was rewarded. In the early hours of the 100th day, a transformation took place inside the cave. At dawn a beautiful woman emerged from the cave.
- Bear-Woman: *(Beaming)* My wish came true! I must go to Shinshi to thank Hwan-ung for his blessing.

[SCENE SIX]

- Narrator One: Over the next few weeks, the Bear-Woman visited Hwan-ung. He called her Ung-yo, which means the bear transformed into a woman. Ung-yo grew more beautiful with each passing day. Ung-yo told Hwan-ung of her loneliness for a husband. Finally, Hwan-ung proposed and they were married. Their first child was born on the slopes of the T'aebaeksan under a birch tree.

Ung-yo:
(Bear Woman) *(All smiles)* Hwang-ung, what shall we name our precious son?

Hwang-ung: *(Proudly)* He shall be called Tang-gun, Lord of the Birch Trees.

[SCENE SEVEN]

Narrator One: A few days later after Tan-gun's birth.

Ung-yo:
(Bear Woman) *(Concerned)* I know that you have visions. Please speak to me about our son's future.

Hwan-ung: After I leave earth, Tan-gun will create a beautiful kingdom in the year 2333 BCE that shall be called Choson.

Ung-yo:
(Bear Woman) Choson?

Hwan-in: Choson means Land of the Morning Calm. As the founder of this great nation, he will teach his people many important matters in government, agriculture, and the worship of god. His people will honor and love him for centuries.

Ung-yo:
(Bear Woman) Will he remember his time with us in Shinshi?

Hwan-ung: Yes, at the age of 1,908, he will stop ruling as a king. He will choose to return to T'aebaeksan as a San-Shin.

Ung-yo:
(Bear Woman) San-Shin? What does that mean?

Hwan-ung: *(Laughing)* Oh, my lovely wife, I often forget that you are still learning the ways and words of humans. Forgive me. Let me explain it another way. His people will worship him as a mountain spirit or a mountain god. Yes, generation after generation of his people will continue to honor him and seek his guidance in times of trouble.

Narrator Two: Generations of Koreans have honored Tan-gun as the founder of their beautiful country.

Narrator One: Some say near the end of Tan-gun's reign, an old tiger visited the mighty ruler. His father was the very tiger who had shared a cave with Tan-gun's mother. The tiger wanted to know if all tigers had to live in shame because of his father's impatience and leaving the cave after twenty days. This tiger also wanted to experience life as a human.

After listening to Tan-gun's detailed explanation of the tiger's new responsibilities to the Korean nation as a human, tiger's wish came true. Tan-gun named him the Tiger of Shinshi.

Narrator Two: For thousand of years especially in times of turmoil, the tiger has been a powerful symbol for the Korean people. The tiger represents strength, speed, and craftiness in battle.

Appendix 1
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR INDEPENDENT WORK

1. How did the heavenly deities of ancient Korea view earth?
2. In legends and myths, what is the significance of the solitary journey to a mountain?
3. Why is a mountain considered a powerful symbol?
4. Explain how one perceives the world if he or she follows the teachings of Shamanism.
5. State two details in the myth that are related to Shamanism.
6. According to historians and the myth, what year was Choson founded?
7. Describe why Tan-gun's birth under a birch tree has relevance to Siberian tribes.
8. In folk paintings, what animal usually accompanies the mountain spirit?
9. What qualities did the bear demonstrate that modern Koreans value?
10. State a scientific reason a bear could survive in a cave better than a tiger.
11. Why do you think the myth of Tan-gun has survived since ancient times?
12. State an explanation for Tan-gun having parents from very different ancestral backgrounds.
13. What holiday is celebrated in Korea to honor Tan-gun?
14. What is the mountain peak where Tan-gun was supposedly born?
15. Why is this myth sacred to people in Korea today?

Appendix 2

SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

1. Choose one of the following headlines and construct a news report. Use information from the Tan-gun myth and research materials to add interesting details to your article.
 - A. Lord of Heaven Mourns Son's Departure
 - B. A Bear and a Tiger Sneak into Hwan-ung's Palace
 - C. Miracles Occurs in Cave
 - D. Choson Citizens Celebrate the Birth of Tan-gun
 - E. The Real Story Behind Tan-gun's Mysterious Abdication
2. In the myth, the bear and the tiger reflect qualities found in humans. What does this reveal about the attitudes and values of the ancient Koreans? Imagine that you are the bear or the tiger at the beginning of the play. Why do you want to become a human? Are there any disadvantages to becoming a human?
3. Locate reference books that depict life or artifacts from Korea. Design a historical prop for the play. For example, a replica of an ancient Silla crown may be an appropriate project. The basic design, deer antlers surrounded by tree-like shapes, symbolizes Shamanist beliefs.
4. Write a creation myth about your region. Include details that accurately portray your region's geography, animals, and climate. Create animal characters that possess human qualities. You may include a historical figure from your region, too. The action in your myth should reveal the attitudes and values of the people in your community.