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Jeju Island, the Three Clans Myth, and Women Divers: Female Importance in Jeju's Cultural  
History

## Introduction

Jeju<sup>1</sup> Island, officially the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province, lies 90 kilometers off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula and forms a province of South Korea. It is an interesting place, considered by many historians to be unique from mainland Korea before it was absorbed into the larger state, with fascinating cultural phenomena and a murky past. Although there is not much scholarship on the early history of Jeju<sup>2</sup> and little in the written record about the island, it is possible to theorize what early Jeju cultural history may have looked like through a combined examination of the island's mythology and modern-day culture.

To gain a greater understanding of what early Jeju human culture may have looked like, I will examine the Myth of the Three Clans of Jeju Island, Jeju's most prominent foundation myth. It is not the only foundation myth originating from the Korean Peninsula, but it is unique in that it features a key reversal between the roles of men and women in a narrative that is otherwise similar to other Korean foundation myths, the rest of which are found on mainland Korea. Myths can be thought of as reflecting a people's society, culture, and perceived history, so the nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Note on Korean romanization: both the Revised Romanization of Korean (RR) and the McCune-Reischauer (MR) systems of Korean romanization will be used in this paper. The system used for any given word will be based on the source material from which it is drawn. For example, the term "*haenyeo*" is written using RR in the sources used for this paper, while the term "Yang-ŭlla" is written using MR in the original source. The only exception is the term "Jeju," which has conflicting romanizations in the sources referenced herein, so its nationally-recognized name will be used; since South Korea officially uses RR, that system will be used for the spelling of "Jeju."

<sup>2</sup> Jeju will, from here, refer to Jeju Island, which is the main island of Jeju Province. "Jeju" is thus not to be confused with Jeju Province, which includes several smaller islets, or Jeju City, the capital of Jeju Island.

foundation myths tells us something about those three aspects of a place. “Perceived” is used as a prefix to history here because although the impossible or fantastic usually occurs in some form in myths, they are nonetheless regarded as fact by their early audiences. The cultural reflections that can be found in myths and other forms of folklore make them useful tools for studying history. Thus, the role reversal found in the Three Clans myth should be considered important in the study of Jeju’s early cultural history, as it suggests that early Jeju culture was somehow fundamentally different from early mainland Korean culture. Furthermore, due to the fundamental difference between the Three Clans myth and other Korean foundation myths having to do with the roles of men and women, the resulting fundamental difference between the two early cultural histories seems to concern the roles of men and women relative to each other in the two societies. In particular, the Three Clans myth seems to suggest that women were considered equal to men in early Jeju society.

The time period in question is, of course, fairly distant, as it concerns a time when mythology was circulated as fact. The relevant time period will be discussed in further detail below. The implications of the Three Clans myth do not end in that time period, however. Another interesting aspect to consider with regards to the question of female importance on Jeju is the modern-day phenomenon of *haenyeo*. *Haenyeo* is “an occupation of diving underwater without a breathing apparatus to collect such seafood as abalone, conch, sea cucumber, sea mustard, and agar” (Park and Ko 12). The term refers both to the occupation and the divers themselves. Particularly relevant to the exploration of the Three Clans myth is that all *haenyeo* are women. Their cultural significance on the island begs the question of whether they are a highly unusual occurrence in a patriarchal contemporary world, or if they are in fact a relic of an ancient past—one in which women held roles not inferior to men, but equal to them.

To determine whether or not this theory holds true, I will first give a historical background of Jeju with regards to mainland Korea as a basis for considering the two entities as being different, as well as an examination of early cultural history on mainland Korea as a way to see what early Jeju may not have looked like in terms of women's roles in society. I will then give a summary and analysis of the Three Clans myth both by examining its narrative structure and by using William R. Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore" to classify the myth in a way that will make sense for the argument developed here. At that point, I will introduce another Korean foundation myth, the Myth of Tan'gun, and conduct a comparative analysis between the Three Clans myth and the Tan'gun myth by including discussions of the similarities and differences between their narrative structures. Finally, I will explore the history and implications of the *haenyeo*, thereby connecting Jeju's early cultural history to its contemporary one.

It is important to note that the lack of scholarship on Jeju's early history and culture make it difficult to find concrete evidence to support my argument. Without that sort of verification, the conclusions drawn here are merely conjecture. That, however, is the reality of mythology studies; my work is meant to be used as a starting point for further arguments and developments in this field.

### **Historical Background**

Jeju history is not often discussed as its own unique entity. Presumably, this is because academics have always lumped Jeju in with the rest of Korea, thus never dedicating time to research Jeju as a separate polity, even though it almost certainly existed independent of mainland Korea, or any other state, for that matter, for the earlier part of its history. In fact, the prominence of the Three Clans myth and the fact that it is so different from the Tan'gun myth suggests that at some point in the island's history, the Jeju people had a culture unique from that

of any other people, something that is, in some respects, even acknowledged today. Jeju's early human history certainly deserves an in-depth examination with regards to the role of women in society because the assumption that mainland Korea's history speaks for Jeju's history may no longer hold true, especially in this particular area. It is possible to say that based on a general tendency to overlook the independence or uniqueness of Jeju, the way Jeju is perceived in relation to Korea could be considered a sort of metaphor for the way Korea has historically been perceived in relation to China: as just a small part of a larger whole, existing as an extension of a the larger state's culture rather than contributing its own unique aspects to it.

A brief history of Jeju that is useful for the purposes outlined in this paper can be found in *Jejueo: The Language of Korea's Jeju Island*. The first chapter in the book describes how the island was "created from volcanic eruptions some two million years ago" (Yang et al. 2). These eruptions originated from Hallasan, or Mount Halla, a now-dormant volcano that lies in the center of the island (see figure 1). The earliest signs of human settlement on Jeju date as far back as ten thousand years ago, and as the island's population increased, it grew into a "distinct civilization that came to be known as the Tamna Kingdom" (Yang et al. 2). Although there is not a known start date to the Tamna Kingdom, it is said to have been "well established by the early centuries of the first millennium AD" (Yang et al. 2). The Tamna Kingdom appears to have existed independently until the fifth century. At that point, the island became "a tributary state" during the Korean Three Kingdoms period and maintained "quasi-independent status" until it was later absorbed by Koryŏ in 1105 (Kiaer 2). Throughout this history the island was known by various names until after the annexation by Koryŏ, at which point, in 1295, it finally received the name we are familiar with today: Jeju<sup>3</sup> (Yang et al. 2). The variety of names the island has been

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<sup>3</sup>Jeju actually would have been known as "Cheju" in MR.

known as, both within the Korean canon and as bestowed by outside cultures, makes its history complicated to trace, since any one of these names may have been used alternately by different cultures, meaning there is no standardized term that can be used to learn about the island's history before it was universally known as Jeju. This, of course, makes it difficult to study the time period relevant to understanding Jeju mythology, as historical records are not necessarily consistent.



Figure 1. Satellite image of Jeju. Hallasan occupies the center of the island. Source: Robert Simmon, "Satellite Image Showing Hallsan at the Center of Jeju Island," *Wikipedia Commons*, NASA, 6 Apr. 2000, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jeju\\_Island.jpg#file](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jeju_Island.jpg#file).

Nevertheless, before Jeju's absorption by Koryŏ, and even during Jeju's time as a tributary state of the Three Kingdoms, it is still possible to hypothesize that the island likely had its own unique culture. Due to the island's position south of the Korean Peninsula, east of China, and west of Japan (see figure 2), its location "as the junction to larger surrounding kingdoms has meant that the history of Jeju has been shaped by the history of the countries surrounding it," yet

because of the nature of Jeju being an island, giving it a degree of insulation from neighboring powers, it has also formed a “strong local culture” (Kiaer vii). Only as the island’s political status converged with that of the mainland would their histories have unified into a single, indistinguishable unit. They were certainly at some point separate polities, as Tamna Kingdom records have been found that indicate “extensive maritime trade with surrounding areas” and even “a precarious relationship with powers on the Korean mainland” (Yang et al. 2). An article in *The Jeju Weekly* details this maritime history. It mentions that “Jeju built strong relations with the cultures of the southern seas through exchanges of people and cultures,” notably without the control or influence of the mainland in making those kinds of decisions (Joo 2). By “realign[ing] Jeju history against Korean history,” it is possible to understand “the rich maritime heritage” of Jeju (more accurately, the Tamna Kingdom) “away from the [Korean] mainland’s continental bias” (Joo 11-12). These biases, which peripheralized the maritime areas that included Jeju, appear to have originated from early written records kept by Confucian literati in China, resulting in factual inaccuracies (Sunhui and Barclay 11). In light of cultural partiality prevailing in mainland scholarship, it is difficult to paint a clear picture of Jeju’s history as independent of mainland Korea. If Jeju was able to create relationships with other Pacific cultures on its own through extensive maritime trade and culture, though, then the likelihood that the island existed at one time as a state independent from mainland Korea must be accepted.

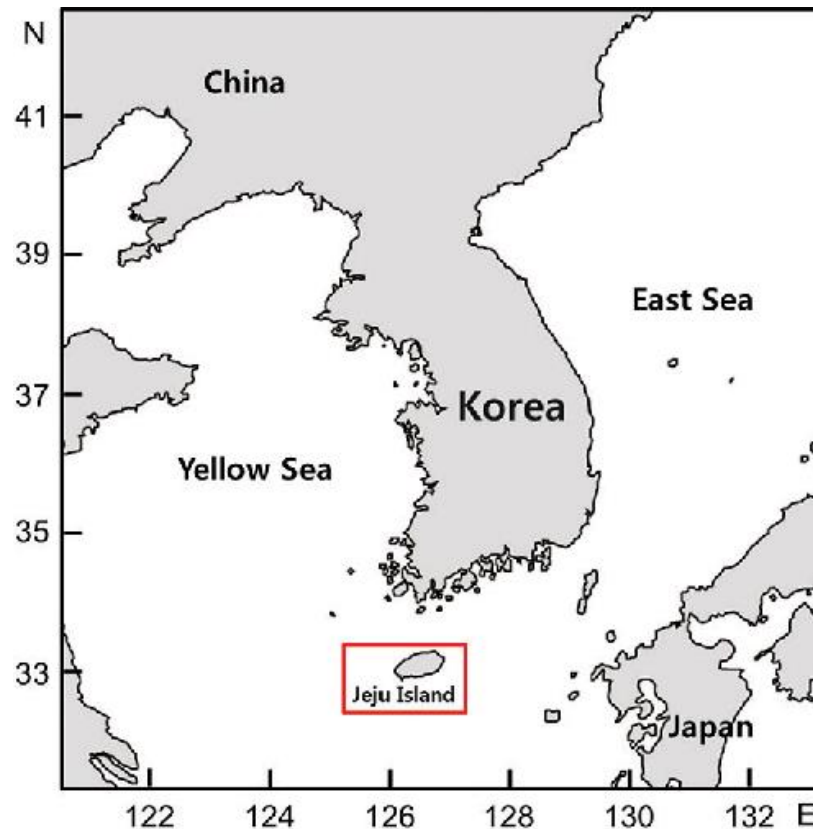


Figure 2. Jeju in relation to Korea, China, and Japan. Source: Hyuck Joon Kwun, et al.; “Checklist of the Tidal Pool Fishes of Jeju Island, Korea;” *ZooKeys*, vol. 709, 2017; p. 137; doi:10.3897/zookeys.709.14711.

It has long been recognized by scholars of Korean history that Jeju “is in many ways distinct from the [Korean] mainland in language, customs and experience” (Grayson 119). It follows that the further back in history one looks, especially prior to the absorption of Jeju into Koryŏ, the more distinctive Jeju will appear in comparison to mainland Korea. One of the most recognized differences in the two cultures concerns the language spoken on Jeju, which, though there is contention in academic circles as to its status as a dialect versus a distinct language, will be referred to here as “Jeju dialect.” Although it is considered a dialect of Korean rather than an entirely different language, many native Korean speakers from the mainland who are unfamiliar with the dialect find it to be unintelligible; there is a “considerable dialectal contrast between the forms of Korean spoken on the Korean Peninsula...and the geographically separated dialect” of Jeju (Janhunen 78). The lack of mutual understanding could perhaps be attributed to generational

differences, considering, according to the “UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger” site, all of the Jeju dialect’s estimated 5,000-10,000 speakers are above the age of seventy (UNESCO). In *Jejueo*, however, Yang et al. cites sources reporting that “Korean speakers have [had] difficulty understanding [Jeju dialect] back to at least the 1500s” (6). The extent of this linguistic difference seems to indicate some kind of early separation of the island from the mainland.

While Jeju’s culture likely had similarities to the culture of mainland Korea and possibly even other nearby states like China and Japan, it is not far-fetched to presume that Jeju also had cultural aspects unique to the island—and especially unique from those nearby states—in addition to linguistic differences. The roles of men and women in early Jeju society may very well represent one of these unique cultural aspects. To examine the early cultural history of Jeju, the time period in question can be described as “ancient;” in following the convention of James H. Grayson, a notable folklorist specializing in the folklore of Korea, “ancient Korean history” will refer to “the period before the tenth century [CE]” (1). Ancient history, then, covers Korean history up until the Koryŏ period. It includes the Three Kingdoms period during which Jeju was a tributary state to the mainland but not yet an official part of Korea, as well as, of course, the centuries before that during which Jeju was an independent polity.

One account of Korea’s history states that the distinctive “Korean” ethnic group or culture has only been around for about 1,300 years; in terms of when the Korean people as they are known today first thought of themselves as a single people, “as a state that has occupied most of the Korean Peninsula, it has existed [only] since 676 [CE]” (Seth 24). Assuming this statement includes Jeju in the Korean Peninsula even though it is not technically part of the land mass, this time period would include the point at which Jeju was officially absorbed into Koryŏ,



and even some time before that, which would also include the period during which Jeju was considered merely a tributary state. Yet 1,300 years still does not account for the entirety of Jeju's human history.

Not only is it difficult to find information on Jeju's early human history, but sources on Korean history also seem to regularly exclude discussion of the island in general. Knowing that there is some kind of fundamental difference between the foundation myths of Jeju and mainland Korea, however, another place to start is to examine the early cultural history of mainland Korea and use that to theorize how early Jeju cultural history may have differed.

Historically, mainland Korea has always had a patriarchal history, at least based on what is evident of the culture's written history. Women "took full responsibility" of the family unit; among other duties, they were in charge of the children's education, household affairs, and family finances (Y. Kim 49). The power of the wife over the finances of the household certainly represents a significant part of the woman's role in ancient Korea. Outside of their largely household-related responsibilities, however, women had few other outlets of power, considering men "dominated in public affairs" (Y. Kim 49).

Outside of the home, shamanism was virtually the only path women could take if they hoped to participate in public life. Shamanism was the primary religion in Korea before other ideologies, such as Confucianism, were introduced to the peninsula. Female shamans in ancient Korea were as prominent as male ones, and by the Silla period, they even outnumbered male shamans (Y. Kim 14). Additionally, historians believe that Korean shamanism "cannot be viewed as a 'religion' separate from 'politics'" (Y. Kim 11). With that in mind, then, women in ancient Korea who pursued shamanism had access to the political world, and in that way, could influence politics. Other than that, however, women had no other avenue to holding power or

influence. Another important point is that ancient Korean shamanistic beliefs, especially the cosmic order, held that there were divine kings and male half-gods, suggesting quite securely that the social order of the time was patriarchal, no matter how many shamans were female. More convincing is the evidence that the majority of Korean women excluding shamans held no power in the public sphere.

### **Primary Sources: The Three Clans Myth and the Tan'gun Myth**

Both of the myths that will be examined here, the Three Clans myth and the Tan'gun myth, are James H. Grayson's translations from the original text materials. The original text material for the Three Clans myth is the *Koryŏsa*, or the *History of Koryŏ*, and for the Tan'gun myth, it is the *Samguk yusa*, or the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*. The *Samguk yusa* was compiled in the thirteenth century by the Confucian monk Iryŏn in classical Chinese, and it is a historical record of Korea starting from its mythical origins and extending until the end of the Silla kingdom in the tenth century CE (Seth 128). It has been "praised by twentieth-century nationalist historians" as embodying "the real spirit and sentiment of Korea" as compared to the other major source of early Korean history, the *Samguk sagi*, which is sometimes comparatively referred to as being "too Chinese" (Seth 128). The *Koryŏsa* was written later, in the fifteenth century, using Hanja script, and is a compilation work detailing the history of Koryŏ, again written by Confucian authors (Seth 143).

The nature of mythology means that stories like foundation myths existed long before the advent of the written record; thus, following an extensive period of oral transmission, there is bound to be differentiation between the original stories and the recorded versions, even if the first written record of a story such as the Tan'gun myth was almost a thousand years ago. Additionally, the status of both Iryŏn and the authors of the *Koryŏsa* as Confucian monks

suggests that their ideologies could have influenced their writing, as was often the case when Christian monks were first recording pagan stories, such as the first written documentation of Celtic folklore. Still, because the *Samguk yusa* and the *Koryŏsa* are the first written records of the Tan'gun myth and the Three Clans myth, respectively, they are the closest to those myths' original forms, therefore making these sources the most useful in analyzing the myths.

Grayson's translations have been chosen as the primary sources rather than another editor's translation due to his commitment to literal rather than literary translation, which he observes by including original sentence structure, original names, and the original writer's commentary (Grayson 29). This method of translation allows much of the analysis and comparison to be done by the reader. It also means that as few liberties as possible have been taken with the text during the process of translation.

### **Summary and Analysis of the Three Clans Myth of Jeju Island**

The summary of the Three Clans myth is as follows (for the complete translation, see appendix A). Three brothers, Yang-ŭlla, Ko-ŭlla, and Pu-ŭlla, wander a barren land (modern-day Jeju) and sustain themselves only by hunting game. One day, a box arrives on the shore of the island containing three maidens from a far-off land (referred to in some translations as Japan, but in others simply as a distant land) accompanied by an envoy. The box also contains five types of grain as well as calves and colts. Each brother marries a maiden and each pair declares a capital on the island by shooting an arrow to divine the best place to live. The three pairs practice agriculture and animal husbandry on the island for the first time, and the population of the island grows and flourishes (Grayson 118-119).

In a broad sense, the narrative structure of the Three Clans myth is not itself unique. Various cultures have myths that bear a similar pattern, especially "amongst the indigenous

peoples throughout Melanesia and the islands off continental East Asia” (Grayson, 119). In this particular narrative structure, an indigenous people, usually of one sex, roams a land. In this case, the three brothers make up the indigenous people. A migrant people comes to the land, usually either over the sea, as in the three maidens, or from the heavens. The migrant people brings with them some kind of culture. In the Three Clans myth, that culture is the five grains and the calves and colts, for those are the materials necessary to introduce agriculture and animal husbandry. In this way, the maidens can be compared to the folkloric motif of the culture hero, although they lack other characteristics typically associated with culture heroes such as saving the world from a great danger or somehow shaping the world. Once together, the indigenes and the migrants procreate with one another, creating the earliest form of a distinct people, nation, or state (Lee xix). Grayson calls the way in which a people describes to themselves the formation of their nation, state, or ruling elite as ethnogenesis (2). Indeed, this last element of the structure in the Three Clans myth is what classifies the story as a foundation myth.<sup>4</sup>

While the Three Clans myth has all the elements necessary for a myth with this particular narrative structure, it has one key difference that sets it apart from other foundation myths of otherwise similar structures found in a variety of cultures, including, most importantly and as we will see later, the Tan’gun myth. In most myths with this narrative structure, the indigenes are women and the culture-bearing migrants are men. The Tan’gun myth is one example of this format. The Three Clans myth, however, has a key role reversal: the indigenes are men and the culture-bearing migrants are women. Furthermore, in some translations and interpretations of the Three Clans myth, the status of the female progenitors is raised, and this is notably never simply

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<sup>4</sup> Korean myths can be divided into two categories: one with myths concerning the “creation of the universe and other works of various gods,” and one with myths describing “the foundation of the nation” (T. Kim 8). A foundation myth thus necessitates the existence of the world and of humankind as conditions for the creation of a nation.

due to their marriages with the three brothers or for any other reason associated with being paired with a male. For example, in one recounting of the myth that appeared in an article for *The Jeju Weekly*, the maidens are referred to as “princesses” (Tran 2). For such a short myth (in most translations, it is only one typed page long), these seem like extremely important aspects of the story, and so the role reversal of men and women as well as the elevated status of the women should be considered significant in some way.

Folklorist and anthropologist William R. Bascom argues in his article “Four Functions of Folklore” that any folktale, which is a term that can be used to refer collectively to folklore, myths, and legends as well as folktales themselves, possesses at least one of four key functions. These functions are 1) acting as a form of amusement for its audiences; 2) validating culture; 3) educating audiences, especially in non-literate communities; and 4) promoting and maintaining conformity within a people by exemplifying appropriate behaviors (Bascom 343-346). One story can be categorized into more than one function, and it is possible that the Three Clans myth is one such story. At least at first glance, however, it appears to fit best with the second function, that of validating culture. A combination of analysis and process of elimination can be utilized to reach this conclusion.

The first and fourth functions, in comparison with the second and third functions, seem to have somewhat flimsy attachments to the Three Clans myth. While the Three Clans myth may have been intended to be amusing,<sup>5</sup> it appears that most tales tend not to have that function alone (Bascom 343). Even if amusement was the primary purpose, then, the story must have been

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<sup>5</sup> I was initially tempted to immediately eliminate this option as being the myth’s primary, or even secondary, function; however, it must be recognized that considering the culture in question existed thousands of years ago and was the precursor to a contemporary culture that is not my own native culture, it is entirely possible that its audiences’ tastes in humor would not have aligned with my own. Thus, I decided to include discussion of this folkloric function without simply writing it off to provide a comprehensive and fair exploration of the four functions with regards to the Three Clans myth.

designed to embody another of the four functions besides the first. The story also does not seem to model any particular behaviors that the audience is taught to follow, thereby promoting conformity within a certain society, as in the fourth function. The fourth function is “related to the [second and third] functions,” but is differentiated from them because the fourth function places emphasis on “applying social pressure and exercising social control;” as opposed to the audience of stories embodying the third function being young children, the fourth function’s target audience tends to be adults who should have already been familiar with social conventions but defied them anyway, and it goes a step further than the second function by not only validating culture but also pushing forward an agenda—in this case, again, a lesson for fully-grown adults who should know better (Bascom 346). No element of the narrative structure of the Three Clans myth suggests the need for applying this lesson of conformity.

Considering the first and fourth functions do not seem to hold much relevance with regards to the Three Clans myth, that leaves only the second and third functions. The nowadays most well-known manifestation of the third function, that of educating the audience, is the idea of the “moral of the story.” This saying is commonly attributed to folktales in reference to a lesson meant for listeners, often young children, to learn from. The inclusion of a moral to learn from could be connected to either the third or fourth functions since an overt moral suggests conformity by putting acceptable behaviors at the forefront of the narrative, as well as also being meant to educate the audience on how to behave properly, but it is more adequate to attribute discussion of a moral to the third function, as the third function has been used in the folklore of various cultures in the “discipline of very young children” (Bascom 345). The Three Clans myth lacks an educative element that could be called its moral, so there is no moral of the story. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to attribute the third folkloric function to it.

By process of elimination, that leaves the second folkloric function, that of validating culture, as being the best function to describe the purpose of the Three Clans myth. It is not only the process of elimination that yields this result, however. Myths that validate culture are not simply explanatory, but they also “endow [tradition] with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events” (Malinowski 91-92). As a description of the origin of the first individuals to cultivate a distinct people on Jeju, the Three Clans myth certainly does trace the origins of its people’s civilization back to the initial supernatural events. It is worth restating what I mentioned earlier about the “improbability” of the events in a story like a foundation myth being able to occur in reality bearing no negative influence on whether its early audiences revered the story as fact. The presence of supernatural events in a story like a foundation myth, then, does not mean that that story should be regarded as fiction. It simply means that the events in question occurred beyond the scope of the power a mortal or “regular” person would have been able to wield. With all of this in mind, it is possible to state that the Three Clans myth bears the closest resemblance to the second folkloric function. This means that the culture described in the myth is a reflection of the culture that existed for the myth’s early audiences, considering the myth would have been used to validate the existing culture. That would indicate that the nature of the equal roles held by men and women in the Three Clans myth is a reflection of some aspect of early Jeju cultural history. Specifically, it suggests that the roles men and women in early Jeju society were at one point in time equal.

### **Comparative Analysis with the Myth of Tan’gun**

The myth of Tan’gun, the most well-known Korean story, is regarded as the main foundation myth of Korea precisely because it is so well-known. The summary of the Tan’gun myth is as follows (for the complete translation, see appendix B). An ancient figure known as Hwanin had a

son, Hwanung, who wanted to descend from the heavens to inhabit the world of humans. Hwanin, who foresaw that such a thing would benefit humankind, allowed Hwanung to do so. On earth, Hwanung brought many great things to the humans, including his ability to cure disease, his teachings demonstrating the difference between right and wrong, and the introduction of agriculture. During this time, a bear and a tiger living in a cave asked Hwanung to transform them into humans. Hwanung gave them a trial that only the bear succeeded in, and as a reward, Hwanung transformed the bear into a human woman. Hwanung married the bear and they had a son, Tan'gun. Tan'gun then went on to establish the nation of Chosŏn and ruled for 1,500 years before retiring to become the Mountain God (Grayson 31).

As is evidenced by the summary here, the Tan'gun myth bears several resemblances to the Three Clans myth. The world and humans are assumed to already exist before the beginning of the story and the state of Chosŏn is formed by the end of the story, classifying the Tan'gun myth as a foundation myth. A migrant comes to the land bearing culture; in this case, Hwanung descends from the heavens to the land, bringing with him the ability to cure diseases, cultural order in the form of teaching the difference between right and wrong, and, most notably, the introduction of agriculture. The migrant mates with an indigenous person, here the bear transformed into a woman, to create a distinct people. In this myth, that distinct people is led by Tan'gun, who rules in prosperity.

In addition to similarities, there are various small differences between the Three Clans myth and the Tan'gun myth, e.g. the migrant people coming from across the sea versus descending from the heavens. For the sake of the argument given here, these differences will be considered negligible, as they are in most cases attributable rather simply to the circumstances of topography rather than indicating key cultural differences. For example, on a relatively small



island like Jeju, a land across the sea would probably seem just as otherworldly to its people as the sky would seem to people living in the center of a larger landmass like the Korean Peninsula. The most drastic difference between the two myths, though, lies of course in the sex of the indigenous and migrant people. In the Tan'gun myth, Hwanung, a male, is the migrant, while the bear, who is transformed into a female human, is the indigene (the bear's sex prior to the transformation is unclear), as opposed to the indigenous brothers and migrant maidens in the Three Clans myth.

The fact that there is a fundamental difference between the Tan'gun myth and the Three Clans myth means that there is a fundamental difference in the way those two early societies, cultures, and perceived histories looked. This fundamental difference probably has something to do with the roles of men and women in the society, both alone and relative to each other. By assuming the Three Clans myth fulfills the folkloric function of validating a culture, the roles of men and women in the story are understood to reflect the roles of men and women in real life; therefore if the Tan'gun myth is assumed to fulfill a similar folkloric function (being that it, along with the Three Clans myth, is an important foundation myth of a distinct people), then the roles of men and women in the Tan'gun myth can be said to validate the mainland Korean culture at the time of the myth's circulation. Notably, this suggests that men, in reflection of the male culture-bearer in the Tan'gun myth, may have held more social power in early mainland Korean cultural history than women did. So if the migrant culture-bearer in the Tan'gun myth being a man suggests the existence of a patriarchal society in early mainland Korean history, as I have explained was the case, perhaps the migrant culture-bearers in the Three Clans myth being women suggests at most a matriarchal society and at least a non-patriarchal society in early Jeju history. The validation of Jeju's culture also legitimizes the idea of a separate people distinct

from that of the mainland, since there is no equivalent gender role reflection in the Tan'gun myth. Without that equivalency, it is difficult to say the two myths reflect or validate the same culture; that argument would simply make no sense. As I mentioned, myths are reflections of a people's society, culture, and perceived history, meaning that the Three Clans myth's existence, being so different from the Tan'gun myth, suggests a point in time when the Jeju people had their own state, whether or not its independence was recognized by surrounding polities.

Let us return for a moment to the beliefs about Korean shamanism described earlier. Recall that in early mainland Korean history, the only method by which Korean women could attain power in the public sphere was through becoming a shaman, and the tenets of Korean shamanism reflected a largely patriarchal cosmic order. Since these beliefs and customs are said to have been held all throughout Korea's ancient history but the Korean people did not coalesce into a single unit until, at the earliest, 676 CE, it is possible that they applied only to mainland Korea, at least before that point in time. That suggests that Jeju could have had an entirely different belief system. It is perhaps more likely that the beliefs of the two regions are closely related in some form rather than differing completely, but it still stands to reason that there could be major differences in some aspects. I hold that this major difference exists in the societal roles of men and women. If the Tan'gun myth reflects the culture of ancient mainland Korea, then the migrant male descending from the heavens to bring agrarian culture to the land—symbolizing his power to create and influence society—reflects a culture where men held the power in politics and rulership. By the same token, if the Three Clans myth reflects the culture of ancient Jeju, then the migrant females crossing the sea to bring agrarian culture to the land—again symbolizing their power to create and influence society—reflects a culture where women held

the power in politics and rulership. As Grayson so aptly puts it, “this myth gives a prestigious social position to women” (122).

The difference between the roles of men and women between the Three Clans and Tan’gun myths are more nuanced than that, however. Whereas in the Tan’gun myth, the indigene offers almost nothing to the migrant except the opportunity to procreate, the power dynamics are more complex in the Three Clans myth. In the Three Clans myth, the migrants bring the agrarian culture and knowledge of animal husbandry, but before that, the indigenes already had a type of culture in the form of hunting. Before the maidens arrive over the seas, the three brothers are able to survive by hunting animals for both sustenance and clothing. Then, once the migrants and indigenes mate, it is the brothers who use arrow divination to select the three capitals in which each pair goes on to live and prosper. This means that the migrants brought the sophisticated forms of culture, but that culture may have augmented that of the migrants rather than simply introducing an entirely different way of life to which to pivot. In addition, the introduction of agrarian society by the migrants led to the pairs being able to populate the island with a new people, but the indigenes were the ones to locate the most ideal places to introduce that culture. While the maidens are a necessary catalyst for the creation of the Jeju people, then, the importance of the roles of the brothers should not be minimized.

There is no such equivalent moment in the Tan’gun myth. In fact, agrarian culture is introduced before Hwanung mates with the human woman, and even before the bear is transformed into a woman in the first place. One half of the main actors in the Tan’gun myth is necessary only for the act of procreation; that seems to be the only contribution the indigene makes. The Three Clans myth and the Tan’gun myth, then, are not opposites. They are just different. If the Tan’gun myth reflects a patriarchal society, the Three Clans myth does not

necessarily reflect a matriarchal society, but rather what could be called a “semi-matriarchal” society—a society where men and women were considered equal or had equal roles.

### **The Implications of the *Haenyeo***

Nicknamed “South Korea’s Hawaii,” Jeju’s economy today relies mainly on tourism, as tourism makes up 70% of Jeju’s economy (Woo et al. 69). The other significant portion of the island’s economy, mainly made up of farming and fisheries, is largely run by *haenyeo*, the woman divers, in the fisheries sector. These divers perform their work without the aid of an oxygen tank, requiring them to make repeated minutes-long dives over the course of an entire work day. That fact alone is impressive enough, but perhaps even more interesting is that all *haenyeo* are women. In addition to being an important part of Jeju’s culture for centuries, for most of the twentieth century, “labor provided by *haenyeo* accounted for large shares of the local economy of Jeju” (Park and Ko 73). This means during that time and continuing until today, women laborers on Jeju have made up one of the most important—certainly one of the most locally prized—parts of the island’s work force. Even before the twentieth century, *haenyeo* had been around for more than 2,000 years, dating its origin before even the foundation of the Tamna Kingdom; men occupied the job alongside women until the seventeenth century, at which point economic and historical factors led to women having to take up the mantle entirely to be able to support their families (Park and Ko 15).

Jeju has long been famous for “the way that women have traditionally played an active role in manual labor activities on the island” (Kiaer 4). During a time in Korea’s history when women had little power, especially in the public sphere, it is certainly unusual that they were able to hold such responsibility on Jeju. Jeju is even sometimes considered to have a “semi-matriarchal family structure” (“Woman Power”). In an informal comparison of Jeju culture with

the culture of a historically matriarchal society in Indonesia, anthropologist Ok-kyung Pak discusses the unique position of women on Jeju as heads of and providers for their families, despite the prevalence of Confucian patriarchal family patterns on parts of the island (3).

Perhaps these surprising circumstances are in fact not so unusual, however, but are rather a relic of a distant past. The story of the *haenyeo* begs the question: does the significant role of women in Jeju's economy for hundreds of years harken back to some truth about the early human history and society of Jeju? It is entirely possible that the culture of *haenyeo* itself may be a result of early Jeju society and a result of continued female importance on the island. In fact, the phenomenon of the *haenyeo* is not the first recorded instance of female labor on Jeju. One nickname of the island in particular reflects the prominence of women in its culture. Jeju is sometimes referred to as "*Samdado*," meaning the "Island of Three Abundances," those abundances being rocks, wind, and women; "rocks" is in reference to the volcanic activity that no longer goes on but resulted in the large quantity of rocks scattered across the island, "wind" is in reference to the island's location in an area plagued by typhoons, and "women" is in reference to the island's demographics (Kiaer 2-3). The "harsh environmental conditions" of the island meant that women "were compelled to work the fields alongside men" (Kiaer 3). These conditions can be attributed to the island's volume of "volcanic soils," which are relatively poor for agriculture, making "only about 23 percent of all Jeju soil...non-volcanic" (Southcott 6). This led to the creation of *batdam*, or low stone walls made of rocks that crisscross the island and help maintain the arable soil's richness and water retention (Southcott 8-9). The abundance of wind also "represents unusually harsh lives in Jeju," again requiring unique adaptations for life on Jeju to survive, such as thatched roofs and the *batdam* (Woo et al. 11). These abundances and the adaptations necessitated by them are reminiscent of the "barren" land mentioned in the Three

Clans myth, as that is exactly how the land is described before the arrival of the three maidens and the subsequent practice of agriculture and animal husbandry. Rather than the land just not being cultivated because of a lack of technology or a lack of the actual seeds that the maidens brought with them, it is the very nature of the land that prevents such development until the culture-bearers arrive.

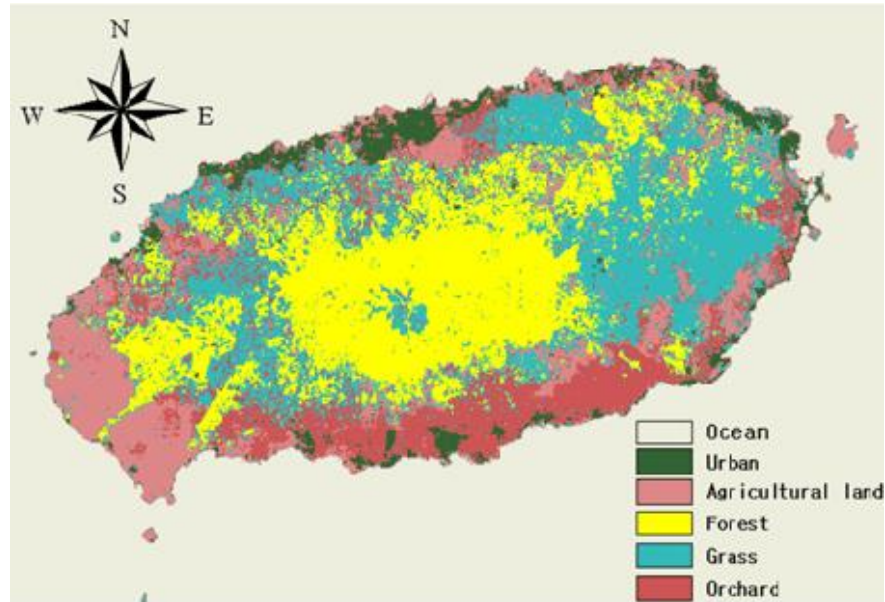


Figure 3. Land use on present-day Jeju. Source: He-Chun Quan and Byung-Gul Lee, “GIS-Based Landslide Susceptibility Mapping Using Analytic Hierarchy Process and Artificial Neural Network in Jeju (Korea),” *KSCE Journal of Civil Engineering*, vol. 16, no. 7, 2012, p. 1261, doi:10.1007/s12205-012-1242-0.

Most interestingly, the inclusion of women in the three abundances is based in a “metaphor reflecting the character of the hardworking Jeju women” (Woo et al. 11). All of this is to say that early natives to Jeju had to invent creative ways to maintain an agricultural lifestyle because the island’s geography almost works against that (see figure 3). It makes sense, then, that with such difficulties presenting themselves, as many laborers as possible would be necessary for successful farming. In addition to the *haenyeo* occupation, then, women on Jeju have also historically participated in agriculture. Whether the reasoning for that requirement was attributable entirely to a necessity rather than an established cultural norm or some combination

of the two is, perhaps, debatable, but it nonetheless sheds light on the cultural perception of the roles of women with relation to those of men on Jeju.

### **Conclusion**

The suggestion of an early cultural history that considered women equal to men rather than having a fully patriarchal or fully matriarchal society is now echoed in the modern Jeju culture of *haenyeo*. Perhaps the title of “semi-matriarchal” that is sometimes used to describe the *haenyeo* of the modern era has a deeper meaning than previously assumed. The female divers who withstand tremendous physical duress to support their families and communities are certainly impressive and deserve recognition for that alone. With respect to the greater historical significance of the idea of matriarchy on Jeju, however, we must recognize the possibility that ancient Jeju possessed what could be considered a “semi-matriarchal” society then, too. With the Three Clans myth comes a certain sense of what early human culture looked like on the island. Not only this, but the myth’s unique narrative structure, as manifested in the unusual role reversal between men and women related to the first bearers of culture to the island and as can be seen in comparison with the Tan’gun myth, indicates Jeju was at one point in its early cultural history distinct from mainland Korea. This is where the significance of the equally important roles of men and women in the Three Clans myth comes in. Considering all of this, the *haenyeo* represent something bigger than just their current status. They also represent the continuity of female importance on Jeju; they represent the legacy of their foremothers.

## Appendices

The appendices here contain the full translations of the Three Clans myth and the Tan'gun myth from James H. Grayson's book *Myths and Legends from Korea*. The footnotes referenced here are included in the original text, and as such are Grayson's notes on the myths, not my own. In the translations, brackets are used to insert words necessary for a smooth English translation, and parentheses are used to indicate insertions into the original text, which the original authors would have used to make their own commentaries.

### Appendix A: The Three Clans of Jeju Island, Full Text

The [*T'amna*] *kogi* says, "At first there were not any human beings or living things [on T'amna island]. Then three *sinin* [divine men] came up out of the ground. (On the northern slopes of the central mountain, Halla-san, there is a cave called Mohung cave. This is precisely where this event happened.) The eldest man was Yang-ŭlla, the second [man] was Ko-ŭlla, and the third [man] was Pu-ŭlla. These three men went about hunting in the wild [areas of the island]. They wore the skins [of the animals] and ate their meat. One day they saw a wooden box wrapped up in a purple cloth coming over the eastern seas. They went immediately and opened it. Inside the box was a stone box and an envoy dressed in a purple gown with a red belt. Opening up the stone box, they saw that inside there were three young women wearing green clothes, and every kind of pony and calf, plus the Five Grains.<sup>1</sup> The envoy said, 'I am an envoy of Japan. Our king had three daughters.' He said, 'Three *sinja*<sup>2</sup> have descended to a great mountain in the western sea to create a nation but they have not married.' According to his command, I have accompanied these three daughters [of his] and have come to this place. Please take these women as your wives, and

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<sup>1</sup> These five grains are rice, barley, the soy bean, fox-tail millet, and Chinese millet.

<sup>2</sup> 'Sons of God', sons of the Ruler of Heaven. A title for rulers or chieftains.



build a nation.’ So saying, [the envoy] got on a cloud and left. The three men, according to their age, took one of the women and married them. By shooting a boy they divined and selected the places with the best land and the most flavourful water to live in. The place where Yang-ǔlla lived was the most important settlement, the place where Ko-ǔlla lived was the second most important settlement, and the place where Pu-ǔlla lived was the third settlement. This was the first time that they had planted seeds, and had practiced agriculture. With the ponies and calves they practiced animal husbandry. The [numbers of the animals] increased and the population increased.” (Grayson 118-119).

## Appendix B: The Myth of Tan'gun, Full Text

Ko Chosŏn (Wanggŏm Chosŏn)

It is written in the *Wei shu*,<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand years ago, there was a man called Tan'gun wanggŏm. He established a city at Asadal and founded a nation called Chosŏn (In another book it is called Muyŏp-san mountain or Paeg-ak mountain and is located in Paek-chu. It is also said to be to the east of Kaesŏng. This is the present Paegak-kung palace.). This was in the time of the Emperor Yao.<sup>2</sup>

It is written in the [*Tan'gun*] *kogi*,<sup>3</sup>

In ancient times, Hwanin (this means Chesŏk) had a *sŏja*<sup>4</sup> [called] Hwanung. He desired to descend from Heaven and to possess the world of men. His father, realizing his son's intentions, descended to the three great mountains and saw that mankind would benefit [from his son's actions]. He gave his son the three *Ch'ŏn puin*<sup>5</sup> and commanded him to go and rule [over mankind].

Taking with him the three thousand [spirits], Hwanung descended upon the summit of T'aebak-san<sup>6</sup> beneath the tree by the sacred Altar (T'aebaek mountain is now Myohyang-san.).

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<sup>1</sup> A record of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), one of the 'barbarian' dynasties during the period of disunity from the third to sixth centuries. It contains substantial information on the peoples surrounding the empire. The received text, however, does not contain the Myth of Tan'gun. This may have been lost, or the book referred to here as the *Wei Shu* may be another work of a similar name.

<sup>2</sup> The Emperor Yao was the fourth of the Five Emperors of Chinese primordial time. He is alleged to have reigned from BC. 2356 to 2255.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tang'gun kogi*, being a record of Tan'gun and his dynasty, is no longer extant. Nothing is known about it other than that writers in the Koryŏ period quoted from it.

<sup>4</sup> *Sŏja* normally means the son of a secondary wife or concubine. It can also mean a second son of a principal wife.

<sup>5</sup> Heavenly seals, or heavenly treasures. Although it is no longer known what these objects actually were, they were symbolic representations of the authority of the ruler.

<sup>6</sup> Regarded as being modern Paektu-san (in China called Changbai Shan). A dead volcano, it is 2,774 metres high and stands astride the border between Manchuria and Korea. At its summit there is an enormous crater lake the Chŏn-ji (Heavenly Lake). The mountain is the source of three river systems, the Yalu and Tumen rivers which form the Manchurian/Korean border, and the Sungari River which feeds the northern plains of Manchuria.

That area was called the Sacred City.<sup>7</sup> He was known as Hwanung *ch'ōnwang*.<sup>8</sup> Together with the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the Master of Cloud, [Hwanung] supervised agriculture, the preservation of life, the curing of disease, punishments, the difference between right and wrong, in all some three hundred and sixty kinds of work for mankind.

At that time, there was a bear and a tiger which lived together in a cave. They constantly petitioned Sinung [Hwanung].<sup>9</sup> They wanted to be transformed into men. Then the god gave them a piece of Sacred Mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic<sup>10</sup> saying, “If you eat this and do not see daylight for one hundred days, you will receive a human form.” The bear and the tiger took [the plants] and ate. They fasted for three times seven days. The bear received a woman’s body. The tiger was not able to fast and did not receive a human body.

As there was no one with whom the woman Ungnyō<sup>11</sup> could marry, she went daily to the base of the tree by the altar to pray for a child. Hwanung changed [his form] and married her. She became pregnant and had a son. He was called Tan’gun wang’gōm. In the fiftieth year of the Emperor Yao, in the reign year *Kyōngin*<sup>12</sup> (The year of Yao’s ascension was *Musin*. The fiftieth year would be *Changsa*, not *Kyōngin*. These discrepancies cause distrust [of the text]), Tan’gun established a city at P’yōngyang (This is now Sōgyōng) and called the nation Chosōn. He later moved his city to Asadal on Paegak-san which was also known as Kunghol-san and also as Kūmmidal. He governed [the nation] for 1,500 years. King Hu of Chou, in the reign year *Chi-*

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<sup>7</sup> *Sin-si*, literally the City of God.

<sup>8</sup> This has the same meaning as *Chōn-gun*, Prince of Heaven, the title used for the chief shamans during the Silla period.

<sup>9</sup> Another name for Hwanung meaning the Holy Ung. This emphasises his divine nature in the context of human society.

<sup>10</sup> Both of these plants are medicinal herbs which are used to make curative potions in traditional Korean herbal medicinal practice. The implication is that these particular plants are sacred, containing the power of metamorphosis.

<sup>11</sup> Bear Woman. A phrase akin to terms used in contemporary eastern Siberian myths to refer to transformed humans or animals.

<sup>12</sup> Presumably the year 2308 BC.

*mao*,<sup>13</sup> enfeoffed Kija with [the state of] Chosŏn. Tan'gun then transferred to Changdang-gyŏng. Later, he returned to Asadal, hid himself, and became the Mountain God. [At this time], he was 1,908 years of age. (Grayson 31-32)

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<sup>13</sup> Hu, also called Wu, was the first king of the Chou Dynasty which succeeded the Shang. He is alleged to have reigned from BC. 1125 to 1115. Therefore, the text would place Kija's enfeoffment in the year BC 1125.

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