

Reevaluating Hwarang Images: National Scholarship in Colonial Korea and its Traditional Sources

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1. Introduction*

When attempting to explore the subject of the *hwarang* 花郎, one finds a confusing range of propositions put forward by groups from all walks of life. One of the most widespread descriptions of the *hwarang* is that of “[...] an élite military body used for training the scions of the [Silla] aristocracy in etiquette and warfare.”¹ Persuaded by this concept, the famous nationalist scholar, Yi Sŏn-gŭn 李瑄根 (1905-1983), published his seminal work *Hwarangdo yŏn’gu* 花郎道研究 [*A study on hwarangdo*]² in 1950, which for a long time functioned as a textbook in the South Korean Army. In keeping with this idea, the South Korean Military Academy named its new compound “Hwarang-dae” (1954) and dedicated it to developing “the area into a cradle for national defense by reflecting the tradition of the Korean people and carrying out the notion of a Wharang [sic!] descent.”³ Not only does the naming of the location remind the visitor of a *hwarang* tradition, but there is also a so called “Hwarang Ceremony” performed once a week that is supposed to emphasize “the traditional Hwarang ideal of service to the nation that cadets strive to uphold.”⁴

Somewhat different, and yet again closely related, is the similarly widespread concept of a *hwarang* order, conceived as some kind of Boy Scout organization that acted as an educational body, fostering Confucian ethics among the aristocratic youth of the Silla kingdom. In 1970, the Pak Chŏng-hŭi government established a Hwarang Educational Institute in Kyŏngju, which even today trains both pupils and military cadets in the assumed *hwarang* ethics. It seeks to foster their national spirit, aiming to “create a new generation of hwarang, endowed with a sense of honesty and creativity,” or more specifically “to cultivate a new generation of people imbibed with a strong sense of national pride.”⁵

Yet, this understanding of the *hwarang* as a mere paramilitary corps or national educational organization is not the only widely held interpretation. An equally well-

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established belief is in relation to the religious function accredited to the *hwarang*. Thus, both shamanistic, and Buddhist origins have been ascribed to the *hwarang* by different groups of historians. In the latter case, they have often been associated with the Maitreya belief system.⁶

In addition, there is the similarly well-publicized image of the *hwarang* as a gay community,⁷ which seems to derive from descriptions in *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* that portray the *hwarang* as beautiful boys “arrayed in cosmetics and fine clothes,”⁸ but probably generated in the Koryŏ period, when wandering performers closely associated with shamanistic customs began to be called *hwarang*.⁹ Such an interpretation of the origins of the *hwarang* is widely discounted by scholarly opinion.

Be it due to the scarcity of primary source material or to the lack of interest, modern secondary literature about the *hwarang* in Western languages is equally hard to find. The most exhaustive study on the subject was produced by Richard Rutt. In his elaborately presented article from 1961, “The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang) – Notes on the Sources,” he deals with almost every aspect ever associated with *hwarang* history. This makes the article a perfect source of information. However, in the end his work leaves the reader in confusion about the actual identity of the *hwarang*. Nevertheless, Rutt’s article – which in turn relies largely on two Japanese and three Korean studies¹⁰ – has become the guiding light for most Western research on the study of the *hwarang*.

Alongside Rutt, two other authors need to be mentioned: Vladimir Tikhonov (alias Pak Noja) challenges the opinion of Korean mainstream historians, who still claim the *hwarang* to have been, primarily, a military organization. In Tikhonov’s view, the *hwarang* need to be understood as a basically “[...] aristocracy-led educational institution, [that] faithfully followed the social ideological and religious trends of Shilla society”¹¹ and therefore were obliged to participate in warlike activities as a duty imposed on them by their noble birth, not by their *hwarang* membership. Therefore, Tikhonov states that the military function of the *hwarang* concurrently withered at the time when the wars aimed at the unification of the Korean peninsula under the aegis of Silla came to an end after 676.¹² For Tikhonov, the *hwarang* were first and foremost “the proponent[s] of Confucian moral education and Buddhist self-cultivation”¹³ during the Unified Silla era (traditionally 668-935).

As already indicated by the title of his article, “Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla: Focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate,” Pankaj N. Mohan emphasizes the religious constituent of the *hwarang* movement by presenting the *hwarang* order as a medium used by the Silla kings that “promoted the cult amongst the Shilla youth under their supervision, because it was the surest way to blunt its millenarian edge and harness its appeal as a force of unity and stability.” Mohan, thus, does not engage in any discussion about the appropriate identification of the *hwarang*. Instead, he focuses on the “exploration of Maitreyan elements in the ideological content of the Hwarang order”¹⁴ in order to provide a more differentiated understanding of the *hwarang* and their interconnection with Maitreya beliefs.

What these vastly different positions hold in common is the fact that in some way or another they resonate with, or respond to, the interpretations provided by Sin Ch'ae-ho and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn: In the light of a burgeoning Korean sense of nationalism, the works of Sin and Ch'oe are most influential for our current understanding of the *hwarang*, for they successfully managed to incorporate *hwarang* images into a nationalist narrative of Korean history. In order to better understand Sin's and Ch'oe's respective representations of the *hwarang*, however, we need first to examine the early source material relating to the *hwarang* that Sin and Ch'oe draw on as their textual basis.

A number of modern day authors have contributed to the prevailing *hwarang* images, including An Hwak 安廓 (1886-1946) or the above mentioned Yi Sŏn-gŭn, two acknowledged nationalists of their respective times. An Hwak and Yi Sŏn-gŭn are highly regarded because of their scholarly contribution to nationalist historiography and cultural education, their biographies resembling, in many ways, those of Ch'oe and Sin. Yi Sŏn-gŭn accentuates the educational merit of the so called *hwarang* spirit in imparting a nationalist sense of independence and patriotic devotion. In this way Yi successfully exploited the perception of *hwarangdo* as an educational instrument, providing spiritual guidance, allegedly rooted in historical tradition. In accordance with the patriotic and nationalist ethos of his times, An Hwak also points out the importance of *hwarangdo* 化郎道 (the way of the *hwarang*) as a vehicle for moral education. He, therefore, underlines the constitutive value of the *hwarang* spirit in relation to the national character of Korean history and culture. This interpretation of the *hwarang*, however, again seems to have been inspired by the positions adopted by Sin Ch'ae-ho and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn.

2. The Earliest Sources

While a variety of early texts make mention of the *hwarang*, including sources such as the *Haedong kosŭngjŏn* 海東高僧傳 (*Lives of Eminent Korean Monks*, 1215), the *P'ahanjip* 破閑集 [*Collection to dispose of leisure*, 1254] and the *Pohanjip*¹⁵ 補閑集 [*Collection to mend leisure*, 1260], the relevant sources in the context of Sin Ch'ae-ho's and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's works are *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (*Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*, 1145) and *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (*Legends of the Three Kingdoms*, 1281). The information on the *hwarang* that was provided by means of these two seminal sources was pivotal in the formation of the *hwarang* imagery provided by Sin Ch'ae-ho and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn.

In the *Samguk sagi*, we find the following locus classicus:

“In the spring of the 37th year [he] began to bestow [the title of] *wŏnhwa* 原花. At first, the kings and ministers were afflicted by the fact that they did not know the people. They wished to initiate gatherings of people for amusement in order to take a view of their conduct and righteousness so that they could select those among them, those who were eligible for

positions of service. Finally, they chose two beautiful women, one called Nammo 南毛 the other called Chunchǒng 俊貞, who gathered a group of more than three hundred people around them. [But] the two women quarreled over [their] beauty and envied one another. [So] Chunchǒng lured Nammo to her house and urged her to drink wine until she was drunk. [Then] she dragged her to and threw her in the river in order to kill her. Chunchǒng was executed, and the group became discordant and disbanded.

Thereafter, handsome men were chosen. Their faces were made up and they were dressed in beautiful clothes. They were called *hwarang* and [people] admired them. Followers surrounding them like clouds. Sometimes they refined each other through [discussing] the meaning of the Way. Sometimes they entertained one another with music and songs, and they travelled even to the most distant mountains and rivers. As a result they detect the wicked and the righteous among them. Those who did well were selected and recommended to the court.

Kim Tae-mun 金大問 in his *Hwarang segi* 花郎世記 states: ‘Wise counselors and loyal ministers among them showed outstanding performances and good generals as well as brave soldiers arose from them.’

Ch’oe Ch’i-wǒn 崔致遠 in his preface to the *Nallang stele* 鸞郎碑 says: ‘There is a mysterious way in our country which is called *p’ungyu* 風流. The origins of this teaching are described in detail in the *History of the sǒn* (仙史). In fact, it embraces the Three Teachings so as to help to proselytize men. Moreover, when entering [the house] one should show filial piety to one’s family and when leaving [it] one should demonstrate loyalty to the state – this is the aim of the Minister of Crime from Lu (魯司寇) [i.e. Confucius]. One abides in the act of inaction and practices the doctrine of silence – this is the notion of the Keeper of the Archives of Chou (周柱史) [i.e. Laozi]. One must not do evil deeds, the good is received and to be practiced; this is the teaching of the crown prince from India (竺幹太子).’ Linghu Cheng 令狐澄 of Tang in the *Silla kukki* 新羅國記 remarks: ‘Good sons of the noble families were chosen, their faces were powdered, they were adorned, and one called them *hwarang*. All their countrymen respected and served them.’”¹⁶

The *Samguk yusa*, dating from the late 13th century, recounts the origins of the *hwarang* as follows:

“The surname of the 24th monarch, King Chinhǔng 眞興, was Kim. His given name was *Sammaek-chong* 多麥宗. One wrote *Simmaek-chong* 深麥宗. In the sixth year of the Liang dynasty, [the year] *kyǒngsin* 庚申, he ascended to the throne. He looked up to the ideals of his uncle Pǒphǔng 法興 and was fully devoted to the teachings of Buddhism. He erected Buddhist temples widely and lead people to become monks and nuns. And furnished with a stylish taste of heavenly nature, he much cherished the *sinsǒn* 神仙. He selected beautiful daughters and made them *wǒnhwa*. That he coerced the masses to crowd together and selected scholars teaching them in filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty and sincerity, was also a great necessity for ordering the state. Namely, he chose the two girls Nammo and Chunjǒng. The two beauties’ (*hwa* 花)

followers counted about three to four hundred people. Chunjǒng envied Nammo, she gave her wine and pressured her to drink it until she was drunk. On her back, she secretly brought her [rival] to the North River where she slew her with a stone. Her followers did not know where [Nammo] had been buried, so they mourned [for her] and departed. [But] there was one who knew the plot, composed a song out of it and induced the children to sing in on the streets. [Nammo's] followers went looking [for her], found her corpse in the midst of the North River, and they killed Chunjǒng.

Thereupon, the king issued a decree ordering the abolishment of the *wǒnhwa*. After several years, the king again thought that if one desires the state to prosper it is necessary to put the Way of the Wind and the Moon (風月道) at the fore. Again, he passed down an order to select virtuous men from good families in order to make them *hwarang*. At first, he appointed the young gentleman Sǒrwǒn-nang 薛原郎 as *kuksǒn* 國仙. This was the beginning of the *hwarang kuksǒn*. [Thereafter] a stone monument was erected in Myǒngju and thenceforward [the king] had the people correct the evil and change to the good. Ministers were to be regardful and the people to be obedient. The five constant virtues, the six arts, the three teachers and the six correct [rules] came into use everywhere at that time. I fear that [where] the *Annals of the State* (國史) attest the beginning of the *hwarang* to be in the year *kyǒngsin* 庚申, the eighth year of King Chinji's reign of Taegǒn 大建, the historical transition is flawed. [...]”¹⁷

In addition to these two accounts of the formation of the *hwarang*, there are several entries about notables referred to as *hwarang*, which will be analyzed below. Before evaluating the information to be found in these accounts, however, the above translations of the founding history of the *hwarang* in *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* will be used to establish criteria for the identification of a *hwarang*.

Criteria

In previous research on the *hwarang* there has been no standardized approach that establishes explicit criteria according to which a given person might be designated a *hwarang*. Moreover, terminological vagueness and an all too apparent lack of source materials leave the reader with no other option than to speculate on the actual identity of some of these alleged *hwarang*.

Yet, there seems to be general agreement that those who carry the suffix *-rang* (or *-nang/-lang* 郎) in their names should be considered *hwarang*.¹⁸ This is in addition to those persons who are explicitly named as *hwarang*. Although this principle might be considered acceptable at first glance, it does not stand up to a more thorough examination, as is shown in the following excerpt from the above translation of the *Samguk yusa*¹⁹ account of the founding history of the *hwarang*:

“Again, he passed down an order to select virtuous men from good families in order to make them *hwarang*. At first, he appointed the young gentleman Sǒrwǒn-nang 薛原郎

as *kuksŏn* 國仙. This was the beginning of the *hwarang kuksŏn* 花郎國仙. Thereafter a stone monument was erected in Myŏngju. [...]”

The passage raises two questions of major importance to this subject. The emergence of the term *kuksŏn* 國仙 raises the question of how to understand the exact relationship between the terms *kuksŏn* and *hwarang*. One might regard *kuksŏn* as synonymous with *hwarang*, as most interpreters seem to do. However, this approach only aggravates the confusion about the proper identification of a *hwarang*, not actually addressing the problem at all. Then again, there is the opinion that one should look at the term *kuksŏn* as an honorific title²⁰ bestowed only on particular *hwarang*. Following Kim Yŏng-t’ae,²¹ I would opt for the latter option.²² While some might feel inclined to challenge this position, it should be noted that, regardless of which interpretation is correct, a *kuksŏn* should be considered, in any case, a member of the *hwarang*.

At the same time, the passage shows that it is difficult to consider the suffix *-rang* 郎 as a satisfactory indicator in relation to the classification of a *hwarang*. However, in common Chinese usage the character *rang* 郎 denotes “young gentleman”, a respectful naming convention. To claim that in this case the term provides evidence of a *hwarang* identity, would be mere speculation.

Therefore, the following analysis of individual *hwarang* accounts will only focus on those persons whose biography explicitly states that they became a *hwarang* or *kuksŏn*, which will eliminate a great number of the biographies that are usually listed as index entries on *hwarang*. Hence, the informed reader might notice the omission to mention such figures as Kwisŏn 貴山 (?-602) and Ch’uhang 蕭項 (?-602) who are commonly believed to have been two of the most famous *hwarang* warriors of Silla.²³ However, since there is no explicit evidence that either Kwisŏn or Ch’uhang became a *hwarang* or *kuksŏn*, these and other accounts will be disregarded on the basis of the above formulated criteria.²⁴

2.1 Samguk Sagi²⁵

Name	Identification as hwarang/ kukson, and age	Description	Accomplishments	Descent	Special Features/Remarks
Sadaham 斯多含	His contemporaries insisted that he was made a hwarang. 時人請奉爲花郎 Sadaham was about 15 or 16 years old when he requested the king to [be allowed to] join the military. 時斯多含年十五六請從軍	His style was charming, his spirit and will upright. 風標清秀 志氣方正 His followers numbered approximately a thousand. 其徒無慮一千人	Not available.	He was of chin'gol 眞骨 lineage and a seventh generation descendent of King Namil. 系出眞骨奈密王七世孫也	Even though he was made a hwarang his request to be allowed to take part in war activities is denied at first by the king because of his young age. 王以幼少不請 He died at the age of 17, bewailing the death of a friend with whom he had sworn to be "friends in death" (約爲死友) with. ²⁶
Kim Yu-sin 金庾信	At the age of 15 he became a hwarang. 公年十五歲爲花郎	As probably the most known figure among the hwarang there are numerous stories documenting his outstanding bravery and loyalty to his country.	Primarily known for his outstanding actions as general, especially in the Unification Wars of Silla. 此役也庾信之功爲多	Being the son of general Sohyŏn and princess Mammyŏng, he was of noble birth. 初紆玄降見葛文王立宗之子肅訖宗之女蘭明	His followers called him yonghwa hyangdo (Dragon-Flower devotee). ...時人治然服從號 龍華香徒
Kim Yŏng-yun 金令胤	In the reign of kakkan [honoric title] King Chinp'yŏng, he became a hwarang. 角干眞平王時爲花郎 Age not given.	His humanity being thorough and his reliability considerate, he was capable of winning the hearts of the people. 仁深信厚 能得衆心	During the reign of King Mummu 文武王 he became prime minister and served his superior with loyalty. 文武大王時爲宰事上以忠	He was the grandchild of the famous Silla General Kim Hŭm-ch'ŭn, a fellow soldier of Kim Yu-sin 祖敦春	He readily gave up his life on the battleground and was, therefore, posthumously awarded for his heroic death in war by the king. 遂赴敵陣格鬪而死王聞之悽愴流涕曰無是父無是子其義烈可嘉者也追贈賁實尤厚
Kwanch'ang 官昌 also known as Kwanchang 官狀	As a youth, he became a hwarang. 少而爲花郎 At the age of 16, he was already versed in horse riding and archery. 年十六能騎馬彎弓	His appearance was elegant [...] and he was good at dealing with others. 儀表都雅...善與人交	In the battle against Paekche the king made him a vice general. ...以官昌爲副將	He was born as a son of General P'umil of Silla. ...新羅將軍品日子之子	Following the calling of his father, he fearlessly crossed enemy lines and fought desperately until the end. His bravery and heroic death is not only honored by the king of Silla and his father, but also impress a Paekche general. ...新羅多奇士少年尙如此況壯士乎?
Mumno 文努	The stories of Mumno and Kŭn-nang are embedded in the accounts of Kim Hŭ-mun 金歆運 and Kŏngmun 劍君, two who were known for their sincerity and bravery. Mumno and Kŭn-nang provide a status of role models that Hŭmun and Kŏngmun decided to obey to because of their virtuousness, heroism and modesty which are considered to be typical hwarang features.				
Kŭn-nang 近郎					

As the author of the *Samguk sagi*, Kim Pu-sik 金富軾 (1075-1151), was not only a noted Confucian scholar, but also a well known general, it is not very surprising to find the military aspect of the *hwarang* institution stressed in his description of the individual *hwarang*.²⁷ As shown in the table above, most of the enlisted persons were engaged in some sort of war activities. Also very conspicuous is the fact that all of them were of noble birth.

Furthermore, we notice an emphasis on Confucian ethics in relation to the individual *hwarang* accounts, which becomes strikingly apparent in the account of Kim Yŏng-yun 金令胤, who is described as having the characteristics of *in* 仁 and *sin* 信, i.e. humanity and reliability, which are two well-established moral principles of Confucianism. Moreover, there is also a common link in relation to the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the above mentioned *hwarang*. While most die on the battleground, it is striking to see that all of them do so pursuing the cause of loyalty, be it, as in the case of Sadaham 斯多含, loyalty to a friend or, as seen in the other accounts, loyalty to their country and king. The reference to obedience to elders, as demonstrated in the account of Kwanch'ang 官昌, should again be considered as evidence of the Confucian viewpoint provided by the author, Kim Pu-sik.

The *Samguk sagi* clearly conveys an image of young nobles, who are rewarded for their outstanding bravery and heroism, with particular reference to the active defense of their country and an adherence to the moral principles broadly considered to derive from Confucian ethics.

However, after reviewing the entries concerning individual *hwarang* in the *Samguk sagi* there is little mention of the nature of the *hwarang* institution.²⁸

2.2 Samguk Yusa²⁹

Name	Identification as hwarang/ kukson, and age	Description	Accomplishments	Descent	Special features/Remarks
Sōrwōn-nang 薛原郎 薛原郎	He was appointed the first kukson. 始奉薛原郎爲國仙 Age not given.	Not available.	Not available.	Not available.	A stone memorial commemorating the bestowal of the title was erected in Myōngju. 故聖碑於溟州
Misi 未尸	The king respected and loved him, and appointed him a <i>kukson</i> . 王敬愛之奉爲國仙 Age not given.	He is described as a handsome youth, whose decorum, righteousness, elegance and erudition were extraordinary. 禮義風教 不類於常	He maintained harmony with other youths 其有睦子弟	Not available.	He is regarded as a manifestation of the Buddha Maitreya. 此彌勒仙花也
Kuch'am-gong 瞿品公	He is mentioned with the title <i>kukson</i> . 國仙瞿品公 Age not given.	He is criticized for his selfishness and cruelty toward other worldly creatures. 今察公所好唯殺戮之取驚害從自養而已豈仁人君子之所爲非君使也遂拂衣而行公大慚視其所食盤中鮮敝不滅 But he also shows remorse for his actions.	Not available.	Not available.	Even though he is mentioned as a <i>kukson</i> , he is presented in a negative way that needs to be corrected.
Purye-nang 夫禮郎	King Hyoso appointed him a <i>kukson</i> . 孝昭王奉大玄薩之子夫禮郎爲國仙 Age not given.	When made a <i>kukson</i> , he became the leader of a retinue of 1,000 people. ...珠履千徒 He is also described as being devoted to his parents and his home country. 眷戀君親何論其極	The king rewarded him for his courage by bestowing the title of prime minister upon him. ...封郎大角干	His parents had held high positions, their titles bearing witness of their noble birth. 父大玄阿餐爲太角干母龍寶夫人爲沙梁部鏡井宮主	Not available.
Ŭngyōm 膺廉 / later known as King Kyōngmun-wang 景文王	At the age of 18, he became a <i>kukson</i> . 年十八爲國仙	The king awarded him for his virtuous mind by letting him choose one of his daughters to become his wife. 朕有二女請以奉巾櫛	After the death of the king, he received a mandate and ascended the throne. ...郎奉遺詔卽位	Not available.	He is the only <i>kukson</i> mentioned who was to become a king.
Yowōn-nang 邁元郎 Yehūn-nang 曩軒郎 Kyewōn 桂元 Sukjōn-nang 叔宗郎	All four of them are mentioned as <i>kukson</i> in the account of King Kyōngmun-wang 景文王. Age not given.	In order to support the reign of the king they composed three [patriotic] songs. 暗有爲君主理邦國之意 乃作歌三首	Not available.	Not available.	Not available.
Kim Yusin 金庚信	When he turned 18 years old, he became a <i>kukson</i> . 年至十八王申修劍得術爲國仙	He is said to have been gifted from birth so that many miraculous happenings occurred. 稟精七曜故皆有七星文又多神異	He achieved many victories in his military career and is known as one of the most famous generals of Silla.	Being the eldest son of the Kim-clan, he was of noble birth. 虎力伊干之子舒玄角干金氏之長子曰庚信	Not available.

Even though the historicity of the *Samguk yusa*, with its anecdotes of a rather mystical nature, might be disputed, it still reveals some insights into the image of the *hwarang* at the time the text was composed. Nevertheless, as in the case of the pertaining entries in the *Samguk sagi*, the descriptions of the *hwarang* in the *Samguk yusa* are also heavily influenced by the author's beliefs and worldview. Thus, both the *hwarang* biographies as well as the myth about the foundations of the organization are embedded in magical stories linked to Buddhism.

In contrast with the *Samguk sagi*, the term *kuksŏn* is used exclusively here. Similarly, when compared with the *Samguk sagi*, the *Samguk yusa* gives no clue as to the age at which a person is chosen to become a *kuksŏn*, and also the individual's descent normally remains unmentioned. This leaves us with even fewer indications about the true nature of the *hwarang* organization than is found in the *Samguk sagi*. As can be inferred from the table, the only joint feature of the listed persons is their denomination as *kuksŏn*. As the phrase *kuksŏn* is closely related to Taoist concepts,³⁰ the prominence of the latter term seems to betray a clear will to emphasize the religious dimension of the *hwarang*.

Both sources, *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, communicate a rather indeterminate image of the *hwarang*. Also, the role of a given person as a *hwarang* takes up only a minor part in the respective biographies. In particular, the records in the *Samguk yusa* leave the impression of their being volitional supplements designed to cast a positive light on the appointees, underlining their unequaled careers.³¹ At the same time, both Kim Pu-sik and Iryŏn obviously exploit the apparently already vague image of the *hwarang* for their own purposes.³²

However, both *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* portray the *hwarang* as a youth organization with not only of military, but also a religious function. In both sources, Confucian and Buddhist concepts emerge alongside each other. Thus, the name Sadaham, which "seems to be derived from the Sinified form, 斯多含, of the Sanskrit Buddhist term 'Sakrdagamin,'" appears in the *Samguk sagi*, while in the *Samguk yusa* we find repeated references to Confucianist virtues, the protagonists' loyalty *ch'ung* 忠 to country and king appearing in almost every biography.

3. Modern Reception by Sin Ch'ae-ho and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn

3.1 Sin Ch'ae-ho

Sin Ch'ae-ho 申采浩 (1880-1936), often referred to as the originator of modern Korean historiography, established the idea of the Korean people as a historically defined entity, namely a nation *minjok* 民族. Opposing the prevailing commitment to what he considered to be flunkeyism towards China, and later in relation to the insurgency against Japanese subjugation, he introduced a drastically different consciousness of Korean history as a national struggle against foreign aggressors.

In his work, *Chosŏn sanggosa* 朝鮮上古史 [*History of the Korean antiquity*], published in 1931 as a series in the *Chosŏn ilbo*, Sin Ch'ae-ho pays a great deal

of attention to the *hwarang*, presenting an extensive section about them. In his own depiction as to the origins of the *hwarang*, he underlines their great historical importance. In doing so, he focuses not only on their role in the Silla dynasty but aims to emphasize their importance for Korean history as a whole:

“Wanting to talk about the history of Korea without acknowledging the history of the *hwarang* would amount to snatching away a person’s innermost and [at the same time] trying to capture his mind and would be [therefore] a dull endeavor.”³⁴

Quite obviously, the *hwarang* are represented as being the spinal cord of Korean history. Accordingly, Sin Ch’ae-ho recognizes those who sought to oppose the China oriented faction’s desire to achieve complete sinification as the spiritual successors of the *hwarang* legacy. Thus he places the *hwarang* within the dichotomy of the pro- and anti-Chinese tendencies which dominated the Korean discourse at that time. This aspect becomes evident in his assessment of the poorly preserved source material. Even though Sin also recognizes the value of *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* as the only extant materials on the *hwarang*, at the same time he insinuates that there is a bias in these accounts, emphasizing their status as mere secondary sources. Sin, whose main focus lies in the revitalization of assumed pristine “Korean” values, regards Kim Pu-sik as the person most responsible for this inaccurate representation of historical facts:

“According to Yun Ŏn-i who was a member of the *hwarang*, it was Kim Pu-sik, who – as the leader of the Confucian faction – for the most part effaced the history of the *hwarang*. If he would have had his way, he would probably not have left one single character indicating the existence of the *hwarang* in his *Samguk sagi*. However, as a China devotee he could not ignore [the *hwarang*] since they also appear in Chinese sources, which are to be seen as independent of our historiography.”³⁵

Despite the absence of an equivalent evaluation by the author of *Samguk yusa*, Iryŏn’s depiction of the *kuksŏn* seems to correspond much more closely to the *hwarang* image as conveyed by Sin Ch’ae-ho. Silently entering the realm of mere speculation, Sin postulates that the foundation of the *hwarang* by King Chinhŭng should be regarded as a continuation of the former Koguryŏ institution that was the actual predecessor of the *hwarang*. To corroborate his view, he surmises that the phrase *kuksŏn* derived from the Koguryŏ word *sŏnbae*,³⁶ about whom he writes:

“They were chosen in front of the *sinsudu* altar, and energetically following their studies, they exercised all kinds of [martial] arts like boxing, swordplay, archery and horseback riding [...]. They explored remote mountains and lakes and studied the art of poetry and music. They lodged and dined together at the same place. In times of peace they solved problems and took care of the maintenance of outskirts and roads.

In times of agitation they entered war and in doing so they considered the death on the battleground as a honorable death.”³⁷

As well as the paramilitary focus that has always been associated with the *hwarang*, we are also able to discern, in these imaginative writings, images of scholarship and poetry that even today pervade the *hwarang* concept. In particular, the aspects of joint participation and the ideal of heroic martyrdom are characteristics that are often imputed as being part of the *hwarang* identity.

However, in the light of the examination of the extant primary sources provided here, it becomes clear that most of the above mentioned *hwarang* imagery cannot be substantiated. Nevertheless, all these images have clearly survived until today, which leaves us with the question as to their origin. The question as to whether Sin Ch’ae-ho developed these images himself, or whether he simply identified existing images, will be the focus of further research.

3.2 Ch’oe Nam-sŏn

Not only as an historian of seminal importance, but also as the leading light in the field of modern Korean literature, Ch’oe Nam-sŏn 崔南善 (1890-1957) became known as the first publisher of modern Korean magazines, followed by several other influential publications. Due to this fact, he was able to reach the wider Korean public and facilitate a new consciousness of national history and culture.

Even though he was convicted of collaborating with the Japanese colonial government, Ch’oe was involved in the Independence movement, as was Sin Ch’ae-ho. Thus he is widely known as the author of the declaration of independence. Later on, Ch’oe’s main effort centered on the creation of a nationalist historiography in opposition to the Japanese portrayal of Korean history.

Unlike Sin Ch’ae-ho’s work, we do not find an independent elaboration on the *hwarang* in the publications of Ch’oe Nam-sŏn. Nevertheless, the term appears frequently in Ch’oe’s work, and he successively introduces most of the prevailing *hwarang* images in his compositions. In the end, however, he seems to identify the *hwarang* as a primarily religious unit, as can be seen in the comprehensive chapter “The doctrine of *puru*”:

“Even though the whole people [of Korea] keep up and admire the teachings of *puru*, especially those who belong to this religious group call one another *purune*. A wise and elegant child is worshipped by this group and called *purunim*. Transliterating [this term] into Chinese characters by sound, it is written *p’ungwŏlchu* or *p’ungnyu sŏnhwa*. Basically, this means *hwarang* or *kuksŏn*.”³⁸

Establishing the direct connection between the *hwarang* and the “teachings of *puru*”, which are believed to be of a persuasion that is “idiosyncratic [to the Korean people] since antiquity”,³⁹ entails the assumption that the *hwarang* should

be considered as a genuine Korean organization, the origin of which goes back to ancient times. According to Ch'oe, a *hwarang* was thus a wise and elegant child that was revered by a religious following – a claim quite obviously inspired by the *Samguk yusa*.

The following extract exemplifies Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's indebtedness to this text, as the activities that are usually characterized as being typical *hwarang* features are itemized here as activities of the *puru* adherents:

“Moreover, music, dance and songs are appreciated as joint activities and the spirit of harmony is cultivated. Pilgrimages to famous mountains, great rivers and places of historical value are attempted and the development of a deference filled patriotism is aspired.”⁴⁰

In another chapter on the „fighting spirit of Silla“, we find more than one aspect that was to become established as one of the images of *hwarang*:

“[...] the patriarchal organization of the *hwarang*, who successfully cultivated an utmost loyal principle and a heroic character, was therefore subtly used. 1) The appreciation of integrity; 2) the ease of death; 3) the exhaustive demonstration of the determination to die for one's fatherland were considered cardinal intentions. And all of that underlies the consequent mentality that not the words but the deeds matter. Not retreating on the battlefield was made to the greatest virtue of its concrete manifestation.”⁴¹

At the forefront of this description stands the distinctive paramilitary character always considered to be the most important feature of the *hwarang* institution. To die for one's home country and not to retreat in battle were transformed into fundamental *hwarang* principles. This image, in particular, seems to dominate today's concept of the *hwarang*, as becomes evident in ostensible trivia such as the association of the *hwarang* with a wide variety of martial arts or in the existence of the *hwarang* military academies. The identification of famous personalities from Korean history, such as general Kim Yu-sin, as being members of the *hwarang* order further entrenches this image.⁴²

Another important facet that is reflected in the extract is the description of the *hwarang* as an educational institution. Ch'oe Nam-sŏn mentions the transmission and preservation of culture and tradition as prominent functions of the *hwarang*. According to him the *hwarang* provided “some kind of impetus to education and culture.”⁴³

Adopting this image of the *hwarang*, the South Korean education minister, Paek Nak-chun, drew on the term *hwarangdo* when calling for the need for “combative education” in order to mobilize “the organization of students into a great, patriotic enterprise” at the outbreak of the Korean War.⁴⁴ Just as Yi Sŏn-gŭn implied, “Paek used the term to convey a sense that the training of the youth and the defense of the state were an ancient tradition.”⁴⁵

4. Conclusions

Reviewing the information that has been acquired so far, we are still left with a rather ambiguous image of the *hwarang*. However, it may be safe to suggest that the early sources, i.e. *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, depict the *hwarang* as a youth organization fulfilling both religious and paramilitary/educational functions; in the latter case, nourishing the impetus for loyalty.

However, although *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* provide us with the two main images of the *hwarang* that remain with us today, they hardly offer the sort of textual evidence for the fully-fledged nationalist narratives which Sin Ch'ae-ho and Ch'oe Nam-sŏn were to create. Whereas Sin's primary contribution was in relation to the paramilitary standing of the *hwarang*, based on the assumption of a military spirit rooted in the ancient history of Korea, Ch'oe argues that the origins of the *hwarang* are to be found in the ancient Korean tradition of *puru*. By this means they firmly established the "ring of romance and chivalry, [...] [the] tone of national pride"⁴⁶ that has become ubiquitous in the images of the *hwarang* and has consistently been utilized for political purposes. Thus, statements such as those of the former South Korean President Pak Chŏng-hŭi, who asserted that the "[...] national spirit, the spirit of the *hwarang*, flared up from the people's roots whenever the country was threatened with foreign invasion" are clearly indebted to Sin Ch'ae-ho's vision.⁴⁷

Reconsidering the secondary literature sources on the subject, in the light of the above observations, we can easily perceive the enormous influence this "invented tradition, or rather the repeatedly re-invented tradition, still bears on the modern day perception of the *hwarang*. In fact, not only public perceptions, but also virtually all research on the topic has remained within the conceptual realm created and maintained by eager historians, who subtly exploited the *hwarang* for their own political agendas. Thus, attempts to approach the subject matter of the *hwarang* from different perspectives, for instance those by Vladimir Tikhonov or Yi Ki-dong, have been instrumental in enlarging our knowledge concerning the origins of the *hwarang* institution, but still operate on the grounds of created imagery that is highly influenced by political motivation. That is to say that a thorough examination of the primary sources, available on the basis of coherent translations and contextualization, needs to be accomplished so as to provide a basis for further studies on the *hwarang*. Admittedly, this might be a complex endeavor since the limited source material raises questions that often lead to tentative interpretations. However, even if that were to leave us with a still limited vision of the true nature of the *hwarang* order, the information gained would be beneficial in relation to challenging inaccurate and falsified interpretations of the existing references to the *hwarang*.

Notes

- ¹ James H. Grayson, *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials*, 182, n. 1.
- ² According to Rutt's article, Yi Sŏn-gŭn's contributions in terms of determining the legacy of *hwarang* ideals are of frankly speculative nature, see Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 1.
- ³ Korea Military Academy, "History of the Academy." Seoul: Korea Military Academy, <http://www.kma.ac.kr/english/history.htm> [accessed 28. 08. 2006].
- ⁴ Korea Military Academy, "Cadet Life." Seoul: Korea Military Academy, <http://www.kma.ac.kr/english/cadet/sub5.html> [accessed 13. 11. 2006].
- ⁵ Hwarang Educational Institute, "Objectives of the Institute." Kyŏngju: Hwarang Educational Institute, http://www.hwarang-edi.or.kr/english/sub2_1.html [accessed 28. 08. 2006].
- ⁶ Cf. Pankaj N. Mohan, "Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla: Focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate," 149-173.
- ⁷ For a further examination of the question of homosexuality in connection with the *hwarang*, see Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 57-61.
- ⁸ *Samguk sagi*, 37.
- ⁹ Stephen O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, 55.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 1.
- ¹¹ Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," 336.
- ¹² This suggestion is also made by Yi Ki-dong, "The Silla Society and Hwarang Corps," 13.
- ¹³ Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," 337.
- ¹⁴ Pankaj N. Mohan, "Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla: focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate," 160.
- ¹⁵ While one might want to argue that the manuscripts of the *Hwarang segi* also ought to be considered for our purpose, I follow Richard D. McBride, who in his article from 2005 "The Hwarang Segi Manuscripts: An In-Progress Colonial Period Fiction" states that the manuscripts ostensibly rediscovered in 1989 are an in-progress work of historical fiction composed by Pak Chang-hwa, sometime between 1930 and 1945. For this reason I do not consider the *Hwarang segi* as existing primary source material that needs to be scrutinized at this point. For details see Richard D. McBride, "The Hwarang Segi Manuscripts: An In-Progress Colonial Period Fiction."
- ¹⁶ *Samguk sagi*, 363. The somewhat awkward translation reflects the actual wording of the passage.
- ¹⁷ *Yŏkchu Samguk yusa* vol. III, 202-203.
- ¹⁸ See, for instance, Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 33 or Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," 321, n. 11.
- ¹⁹ Even though this passage is not included in the *Samguk sagi*, the *Samguk sagi* account of the origin of the *hwarang* likewise does not offer a clear identification criterion for the *hwarang*.
- ²⁰ *Samguk Yusa: Legenden und Wundergeschichten aus den Drei Königreichen Koreas*, 261.
- ²¹ Kim Yŏng-t'ae, ["Research on the Buddhist concepts of king Chinhŭng of Silla"], 17.
- ²² This reading would also account for the seemingly conflicting dates on Kim Yu-sin's becoming a *hwarang* or *kuksŏn* in *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi*.
- ²³ The accounts of Kwisān and Ch'uhang bear the importance of alluding to the so called *Sesok ogye* 世俗五戒 (*Five Commandments for Laymen*) devised by the Buddhist monk Wŏn'gwang 圓光 (542-640). These five commandments for laymen, namely: 1. serve your sovereign with loyalty 事君以忠, 2. attend your parents with filial piety 事親以孝, 3. treat your friends with

sincerity 交友以信, 4. do not retreat from battle 臨戰無退, 5. be discriminating about the taking of life 殺生有擇 are held to have been handed down from Wŏn'gwang to Kwisan and Ch'uhang when they asked him for a guiding principle to live up to and are therefore considered to be a sort of ethical foundation of the *hwarang* spirit. For a further discussion on this issue, see the section "A Historical Example" of Remco E. Breuker, "When truth is everywhere: the formation of plural identities in medieval Korea, 918-1170," 280-285.

²⁴ Following this line of interpretation, it has to be mentioned that disciples of the *hwarang* or *kuksŏn*, often believed to be marked by the suffix *-to* 徒 are also not considered to be *hwarang* themselves. As pointed out by Rutt, the followers of Kim Yu-sin 金庾信 are said to have been given the title of *yonghwa hyangdo* 龍華香徒 when he became a *hwarang*, which Rutt translates as "Dragon-Flower devotee". For details on this subject, see the second part of his article, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources."

²⁵ The table is based on the text of *Samguk sagi*, edited by Sumatsu Yasukazu.

²⁶ Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," 334.

²⁷ Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 45.

²⁸ The same holds true when taking into account the already mentioned paragraph about the origin of the *hwarang*.

²⁹ The table is based on the text of *Yŏkchu Samguk yusa*, edited by Han'guk Chŏngsin Munhwa Yŏn'guwŏn.

³⁰ As noted in Richard Rutt, "The Flower Boys of Silla (Hwarang): Notes on the Sources," 10, the character *sŏn* 仙 depicts a mountain man and refers to a (spiritually) immortal being in Taoist philosophy.

³¹ See the account of Ŭngnyŏm 膺廉, who is the only *hwarang* reported later to ascend the throne.

³² The lack of earlier sources about the *hwarang* averts a further examination of this earlier image of the *hwarang*.

³³ Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," 323, n. 12.

³⁴ *Chosŏn sanggo sa*, 321.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 324-325.

³⁶ Sin points out the fact that the word *sŏnbae* can effectively be transliterated (by *idu*-transcription) as *sŏnin* 先人 or *sŏnin* 仙人. While the first option using the character *sŏn* 先, which means something like "first born", would establish the connection to the Korean word *sŏnbae*, the character *sŏn* 仙 indicates a coherence with the term *kuksŏn* 國仙, using the same character for *sŏn* 仙. Unfortunately, these considerations do not follow the rules of logical thought and therefore cannot be considered as reasonable proof of Sin's thesis that implies a linguistic correlation between the phrases *sŏnbae* and *kuksŏn*.

³⁷ *Chosŏn sanggo sa*, 326.

³⁸ *Yuktang Ch'oe Nam-sŏn chŏnjip*, 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴² Again, see Vladimir Tikhonov's article on the *hwarang* to understand a conflictive argument about the *hwarang*'s defiant attitude towards death.

⁴³ *Yuktang Ch'oe Nam-sŏn chŏnjip*, 31.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Seth, *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*, 197.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷ Pak Chŏng-hŭi in 1970, cited by Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism*, 84.

- ⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm cited in Pankaj N. Mohan, "Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla: Focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate," 159.

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