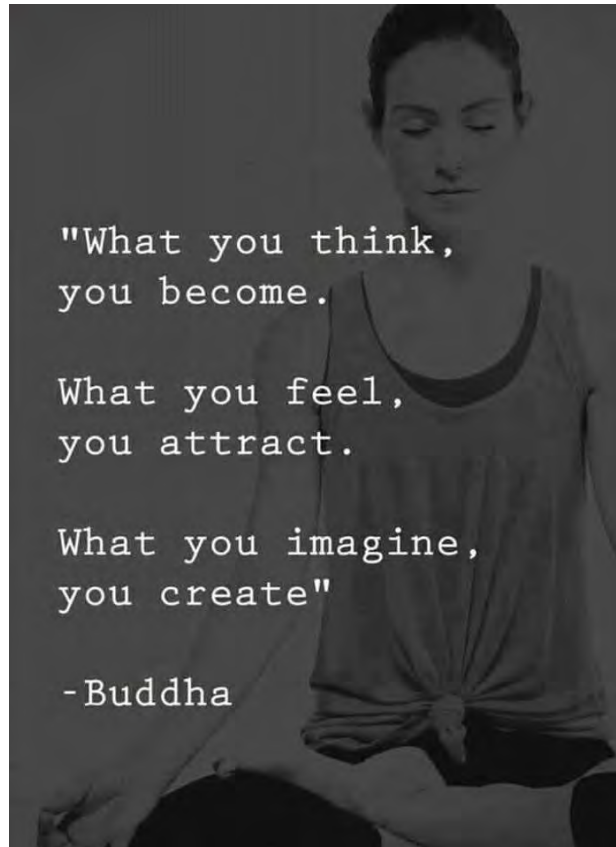


A History Of Korea - Part One

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When studying the history of a people or territory, there are usually a lot of events and dates involved. The longer the period of time under consideration, the more dates, events, and people have to be memorized. The history of Korea is such a long history. Said to be 6,000 years long or longer, it has plenty of memoizable items. For me, such events are needed to form a framework. The real interesting thing is the people and whatever meaning can be derived from their lives as they played out long ago. I would like to know who the Korean people are, where they come from, and how and why they came. Many Koreans today, that I've talked to believe that they are a people of destiny, a chosen people. Surely the belief that all things Korean are best is a common Korean point of view. I'm looking to find out why.

I'll use a framework as a timeline while pursuing my interests. The more than 6,000 years of Korean history is complex. The first humans that migrated out of Manchuria and Siberia were Tungusic speaking people linguistically related to other tribes in Siberia and parts of China that have historically been known as Manchuria. They were stone age people and learned Bronze age technology from

contact with Chinese tribes. The earliest known Korean pottery dates to around 8000 BC and the Neolithic period began thereafter, followed by the Bronze Age by 2000 BCE. But humans have inhabited the Korean peninsula from as early as the Pleistocene era, about 500,000 B.C.

As steppe people they were surely mounted archers. Artistic works of mounted archers on the hunt exist from the Koguryo period. Their religion was shamanism, characterized by a belief in spirits, animism, and the role of shamans as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. The playing of the drum is central to many rituals in shamanism. Two of the most enduring images of South Korea today are the drum and the archer both are deeply embedded in the culture.

The earliest inhabitants on the Korean peninsula arrived around 500,000 BCE. Among the tribes who migrated into what is today Manchuria and North Korea, the most prosperous, established towns and built walls around them. They struggled to survive against Chinese tribes and other steppe tribes. They also fought, and when possible, absorbed neighbors. The tribes were ruled by head men and later in the walled cities they became known as king and were known by the Chinese word for king, Wang. From the earliest times they had to deal with encroachment by the Chinese dynasties. The early walled town countries, including Old Chosun, were Bronze Age civilizations. Through trade with the Chinese Han they acquired some iron making technology but iron implements were only for the elite. The early Koreans got social and political ideas as well as iron technology from the Chinese. Their genius was to get these cultural

technical improvements from China while maintaining their political independence. They learned to bend to the realities of power but to never give up their unique (Korean) identity.

Old Chosun was prominent among the walled towns and their foundation myth became the founding myth for a whole nation. Until today South Korea commemorates that myth with a holiday called Foundation Day. Apparently there was a bear and a tiger who lived in the neighborhood of Old Chosun who wanted to become human. They took their request to the local sky God, named Halmunim, and were told that if they passed a test they could become human. The test was to spend 100 days in a cave with no food or water and only mug wort (쑥) to eat. They agreed and entered the cave. They had a hard time and the tiger gave up and went out. The bear was able to endure and went out victoriously. The bear became a woman and fell in love with the son of Halmunim. They had a child and they named him Dan Gun. Dan Gun grew up to be the founder and king of the nation of Gojeosun or Old Chosun. Is it history or mythology? History is made up of facts. Here are a few facts. What does Dan Gun mean? You might think it is a guy's name. But people don't call their parents or their kings, for that matter, by their first names. Actually Dan Gun is not a name at all but a word that meant king. Until the Chinese word for king, wang, was adopted, all the walled city states used the word Dan Gun for their chieftain or king. Most scholars nowadays say that Dan Gun refers to as many as nine kings of Old Chosun. Since before time began, the ancestors of Korea practiced animism, totemism and shamanism. In the practice of totemism a tribe will take as their totem or protector a powerful or magic animal. They may be known as snake, eagle or bear people. The totem poles of the Native American people illustrate this well. Of course, the bear and the tiger in the story represent the bear people and the tiger people, two competing Stone Age tribes. Or, as some say, it describes a Stone Age tribe's encounter with a newly arrived tribe with bronze tools and weapons. The population was made up of the blood of successive waves of peoples that drifted out of northwest Asia into the peninsula." Were these Korean people? They were the ancestors of the Korean people and they became Korean.