

RESTORING LOST MEMORIES AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH EURASIAN EPICS

EUNKYUNG OH

Director of Institute for Eurasian Turkic Studies
of Dongduk Women's University

Relative to the creative economy of South Korea, the importance of the Eurasian Turkic states is growing. The reorganized resource-rich countries of the Eurasian continent, ancient nations belonging to the Silk Road, have established themselves from the beginning of the 21st century as political and economic powers in the international arena. CIS countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were protagonists of the great Silk Road that linked the East and the West that had been cut off from each other in ancient times.

Of course, we can suggest the world famous Via Augusta, built in the 4th century B.C. by the Roman Empire, and other European arteries as great roads comparable to the Silk Road. Before that there was great road in Persian Empire, too. However, most of those great historical roads emerged as a means to conquer neighboring countries and show off the exploits of a centralized throne. In this sense, the great and ancient imperial roads were limited by their own boundaries and were not intended to connect various peoples around the world. On the other hand, the Silk Road operated as a truly international road, offering free passage to a variety of people across

borders and making it the driving force of an intense economic and social life of various nations rather than pursuing the political objectives of a particular country.

The Silk Road was made neither for conquering other nations nor to rule them. It was paved spontaneously for life and survival as well as for communication between indigenous peoples. Even though the Silk Road was not 'road' but a network system which connected from a oasis city to city, it was created not for a specific nation but for all peoples to prosper together. And it was a productive and creative path that could integrate the East and the West more than 5 thousand years. That is why we can call the Silk Road great and glorious. This historical spirit of the Silk Road is key for resolving international disputes and conflicts and should be restored by all our representatives attending this gathering today in collaboration with UNESCO. That is a meaningful task for all of us and a milestone of world peace to be achieved. Furthermore, to restore the lost and glorious Silk Road spirit is to restore cultural pride and identity for the descendants of those who created this great route. Thus we cannot but attach significant meaning to this restoring task in so far as it shows a way to organize human activity so that it brings peace and hope for all of mankind.

Not much attention is paid to the fact that the Turks were in the center of the Great Silk Road. It may be controversial that their names were not usually mentioned in the history even though the main route of the Silk Road traveled even to Korea along the steppes of Central Asia. The Turks had resided throughout the whole Silk Road spread over Altai, Tatarstan, Bashkir, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan (even though they are Persian, in the meaning of their cultural ties with Turks in the Central Asia) and Sakha, forming so-called 'Turkic belt'.

Now these Central Eurasian countries are attempting to find their own

national identity, to relive the past glory and restore the national self-esteem. Externally these Eurasian states are attempting to organically integrate their brother Turks who had been scattered over the Eurasian continent in the various spheres of politics, economy, culture and the sciences. This objective is not unrelated to the plan to construct a new 21st century Silk Road, utilizing the existing and abundant natural resources. A policy of visa-free traffic between neighboring brother Turkic countries may serve as the political pavement for the construction of a new Silk Road, and the active movements within these Eurasian countries to restore their own heroic epics and list them as UNESCO intangible cultural heritages represent an attempt to recreate the glorious cultural Silk Road that had been missing for a long time.

In this era of a New Silk Road we are able to build a cultural infrastructure for the promotion of political and economic cooperation between the Eurasian countries and Korea, ultimately by identifying cultural correlations and thus expand a consensus of mutual understanding. Thus our concrete purpose is to research and analyze the epic poems and intangible cultural heritages that both Eurasian and Korean peoples have preserved since ancient times, and finally to discover our binary common cultural code. I think all these efforts will create an environment conducive to the recovery of a cultural homogeneity between the Eurasian and Korean peoples.

It is very meaningful for Korea to take part in this process of restoration. Koreans and Eurasians share numerous common characteristics. Among other things, they are homogeneous in language since the Korean language also belongs to the Altaic language family, like the Turkic languages. Moreover, we can find much evidence that Koreans had had a relationship with the Turks since ancient times. From the cultural and genealogical points of view we can infer a mutual relevance between Koreans and Turks.

Of course, most of such relevance lies in traces that we could not find in existing history books or ancient records, but I believe such traces will be investigated by UNESCO. Now UNESCO is making efforts to restore the ancient intangible cultural heritage of the Eurasians and Koreans.

Although the ancient Turks did not have a written literature, they did have strong oral traditions and folktales. Especially oral narratives including heroic epic poems and other epics that were passed on from ancient to modern times. This points to the possibility of discovering mutual affinities with the ancient Korean cultural heritage and a common cultural code among the different nations, thus dissolving the cultural foreignness and borders existing between Korea and Eurasian countries. Under the present circumstances the only way to dissolve cultural borders is, as I have already suggested, to conduct a comparative analysis of Turkic and Korean oral epics. As seen in the case of many nations, ancient mythology is hidden only in the unconscious memory of the people and there are no records of it. Therefore there is no choice but to rely on orally transmitted works. Since epic poems functioned as substitutes of historic recording before the invention of writing, we can presume the history and culture of a mythological era through oral epics. There is evidence that the Turks used their own letters in the eighth century, but their records only survive in the Orhon inscriptions. It is said that the Central Asian Turks and Goguryeo maintained friendly relationships. However, these records are very fragmented and limit our ability to decipher the ancient cultural codes common to each nation. Still, the inexhaustible number of oral epics passed down from the prehistoric era makes up for the lost national history and memory. At this point it is quite notable that the Eurasian epics contribute to establishing the identity of the Turkic peoples, while there are abundant data that have academic value in these Eurasian epics for deciphering the

origin or cultural code inherent to the Korean people.

In the process of comparative study, we have noticed an interesting fact, that there is no heroic epic poem in Korea comparable to the colorful Turkic epic poems narrating historical events. If we remember that Koreans had been living an agricultural life for a long time rather than a nomadic life, it is very noteworthy that the Korean heroic epic poems that are intrinsic to horse-riding peoples have come down as a form of shamanic epic poems. This makes it necessary to carry out a comparative study between Korean shamanic epic poems and the Turkic epos in Central Asia which have a strong oral tradition. If we assume that Korean heroic epic stories and historical facts had been potentially dissolved in the shamanic epic poems, the Turkic oral literature that has been delivered in the form of both heroic and shamanic epics will provide valuable clues not only for analyzing and investigating the general mechanism of epos, but will also offer significant information concerning the prehistory of Korea.

The reason that Turkic epic poems are important is that they are related to ancient history. Notable among them is *Alpamysh*, which is known to represent the Turkic nations and appears in many different versions. For example, the Altay version is more like a mythology; in time it gradually changed into the epic poem which includes historical facts in the process of being disseminated and transformed into the versions of *Kongrot* and *Oghuz*. Epic poems played an important role to preserve the history and spread a story in time without records or chroniclers. Thus, a history of the migration of Turkic peoples and the formation of particular tribe can be inferred from the different versions of *Alpamysh*. In the version of *Altay Alp Batir*, his wife and their seven sons are regarded as ancestors of the Altaic people. Moreover, *Alpamysh* in the Uzbek version contributed to the unification of tribes and is described as the ancestor of each of the tribes.

In this manner, the epic poem, which had been integrated from 'the Turkic Belt', or the Silk Road of the Turkic people, which played such a large role in world history, give us important clues for understanding the worldview of the Turkic peoples. It is same with the worldview of present-day Turkic people, and moreover it preserves the 'archetype' of Korean shamanic epic poems.

Oral literature, compared to written literature, contains greater universality in that it transmits the morality and universal consciousness of human beings more than specific individual emotions.

Manas, *Keroglu* and *Alpamysh* are known as the typical heroic epic poems of the Central Asian Turkic peoples. Such epic poems have been delivered as *Alip Manash* among Altay mountaineers, as *Alpamis* among Kazakhs and Karakalpaks, as *Alpamysh* among Uzbeks, as *Alpamisa* among Bashikirs, as *Alip Menshen* among Tatars, and as *Bamsi Beyrek* among *Oghuz Turks*.

The diffusion of the epic poem over the Central Asian region played an important role in the dissolution and integration of regional nomad peoples and firmly laid the economic and cultural solidarity between Eurasian peoples.

At first the Turkic epic poem existed in the foothills of Altai as early as the 7th and 8th centuries and was then supplanted to the Syrdarya River region by the Oghuz Turks around the 9th and 10th centuries. From then on, the epic began to spread into the Kazakh steppe as *the Kypchaks* moved westward. The final version of *Alpamysh*, which Uzbeks and Kazakhs share, had been completed with the migration of the Uzbeks to Southern Uzbekistan.

The heroic epic poem had spread widely among Turkic tribes in the form of various versions. These versions are divided largely into four variants:

Kongrat, Kypchak, Oghuz, and Altai. According to the assumption of V. Zhirmunsky the heroic features that appeared in the *Alpamysh* versions began to spread among Turkic tribes residing in the Altai Mountains in the form of legends as early as the 6th and 8th centuries, from there they were transferred to the southern area of the Syrdaria River with the migration of *the Oghuz* tribe and then flowed to the *Kypchaks* just before the Mongolian invasion. Karl Reichle asserts that *the Oghuz* version was already formed between the 9th and 11th centuries even before the westward migration of the Oghuz. Topographically the Oghuz version ranges over East Anatolia, Azerbaijan, the Caucasus and Iran, while Kongrot spread around Syrdaria and Altai along the Altai Mountains. *Bamsi Beyrek*, regarded as the Oghuz version, contains folk tales narrated in *the Book of Dede Korkut*, which is the most famous among the epic stories of the ancient Turks. It bears similarity with *Alpamysh* in plot and subjects, because the content of epic tales exerted influence on each other since the Kongrot and *Oghuz tribes* had begun to have relationships. This kind of *Alpamysh* has been conveyed in the form of the epic poem among Uzbeks, Kara-kalpaks, Kazakhs, and tribes around Altai, whereas it is legend or folk story among Tajiks, Tartars and some Central Asian people.

The epic of *Manas* is distinguished both in its size and in its degree of artistic completion from other world epics. The importance of this great epic poetry is not at all inferior to that of the Homeric epic. It is expected that the study of *Manas* could make it possible to restore the prototype of Central Asian prehistory, literature, philosophy and folklore to some extent, to say nothing of scientific achievements in the study of epics. We cannot exclude the possibility that the prototype of the work has been changed in the artistic shaping process, but the history known to everybody and content of *Manas* largely coincide with each other. From this point of view, *Manas* can

be valuable unrecorded historical data, let alone one of the most valuable epics.

Even though *Manas* is a Kyrgyz epic poem, it can be counted as the history of most of the Turks in Central Asia. The reality is that world history has been written in the eyes of western historians with orientalist views until the present time and very little attention has been paid to the history of the Turks, Tajiks and Central Asia as far as the international community is concerned. *Manas* is the name of a legendary Kyrgyz leader who laid a cornerstone for the Kyrgyz people scattered over Central Asia to find their identity and win their independence as well as the name of a heroic epic poem that conveys the nomadic history of the Kyrgyz people.

An epic about Turkic history focusing on Kyrgyz and its significant events had been passed on in part even before the 10th century, and it came to take a unified oral form among the Kyrgyz people in the second half of the 10th century. However, there was no specific title or name to cover this entire narrative as a genre. Kyrgyz Khan Manas had settled down with a group of his compatriots in present day Kyrgyzstan, which began to take shape as an independent state only in the 14th century. Then people began to sing all this story called *Manas* and include the other poems that had up to that point been passed orally as *Manas*. This epic poem, the story of the heroic deeds of Manas, his son Semetei and his grandson Seitek, was orally transmitted until the 15th century.

Manas was not created on the basis of personal imagination by a specific writer or storyteller. It was composed of narratives taken from contemporary incidents and trends. *Manas* is known for not being related to *Alpamysh*, but they have considerable affinities in accordance with the performers' styles, both being heroic epics. Likewise, such cultural affinities between Korean and Eurasian intangible cultural heritage should

be compared and analyzed as a series.

Therefore I would like to urge UNESCO not to stop restoring valuable intangible cultural heritage for the development of world culture. To this end it would be quite necessary:

- To identify the process of formation and development of the Turkic epic poems in terms of culture and history;
- To identify the affinities between Korean and Eurasian epic poems;
- To set up a pan-Asian database for the research of Korean folklore as a prehistoric cultural code transcending shamanism;
- To establish homogeneous cultural correlations between Korean and Eurasian peoples for further open cultural interaction.

The research supported by UNESCO on intangible cultural heritage and epic poems will act as a bridge to restore the lost valuable memory of the past and to link the past to the present. Furthermore, this bridge will also reestablish the connection between the countries of the Great Silk Road that had been disrupted at one point in the past. And then the bridge may come to be called a bridge of open communication and integration in its real meaning, which would coincide with the spirit of the Great Silk Road. Therefore, UNESCO in collaboration with us, the Turkic specialists, should assume the cherished mission of paving the road and building the bridge for these peoples to open their minds.

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