

Birth of a Monster Story on the Borderlands: The “Big People” (*Chōjin*) Legend in 8th-Century Silla

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The Chinese official historical chronicle *Xintang shu* 新唐書 (compiled c. 1060), includes a section entitled “An Account of Silla” 新羅傳. As a contemporary historical source recording in detail the domestic affairs of the mid-8th century Korean kingdom Silla 新羅, it is a document that has attracted a good deal of attention over the years. At the same time, however, it also contains a number of indecipherable passages like the following:

Silla is bordered on the east by the Big People (Ch, *changren*, J. *chōjin* 長人). These giants, 9 meters tall in stature, have teeth like fangs, nails like sickles, and their whole bodies are covered in black hair. They eat the meat of birds and beasts raw without cooking it, and at times even capture men and eat them. Human women they capture and force to mend their clothing. Mountains line the border of that land for thousands of *li*. In a certain valley among these there is a gate of iron to protect against the Big People, called “the barrier gate” (Ch. *guanmen* 關門). Silla always has a crossbow corps of several thousand men stationed there watching over it. (Figure 1)

The meaning of this seems to be that to the east of Silla, on the other side of a barrier gate, there exists a population of “fantastic creatures,” or *igyō* 異形. The same historical document is also found in a more detailed form within the Chinese encyclopedic compendium *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (compiled in the late 10th c.),¹ yet both versions likely draw ultimately upon a third (now lost) source, the mid-8th-century *Jiven* 紀聞 by Niusu 牛肅. Thus even before 743, when envoy Wei Yao 魏曜 was sent to Silla from the Tang court, this legend of the Big People had already been related in China by some traveler, after which it made its way to Niusu, who put it down in written form.

To the cursory glance, this might seem but another “fantastic creatures” story of little interest. Upon further analysis, however, of various historical documents

¹ *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, vol. 481, entry on “Silla” 新羅.

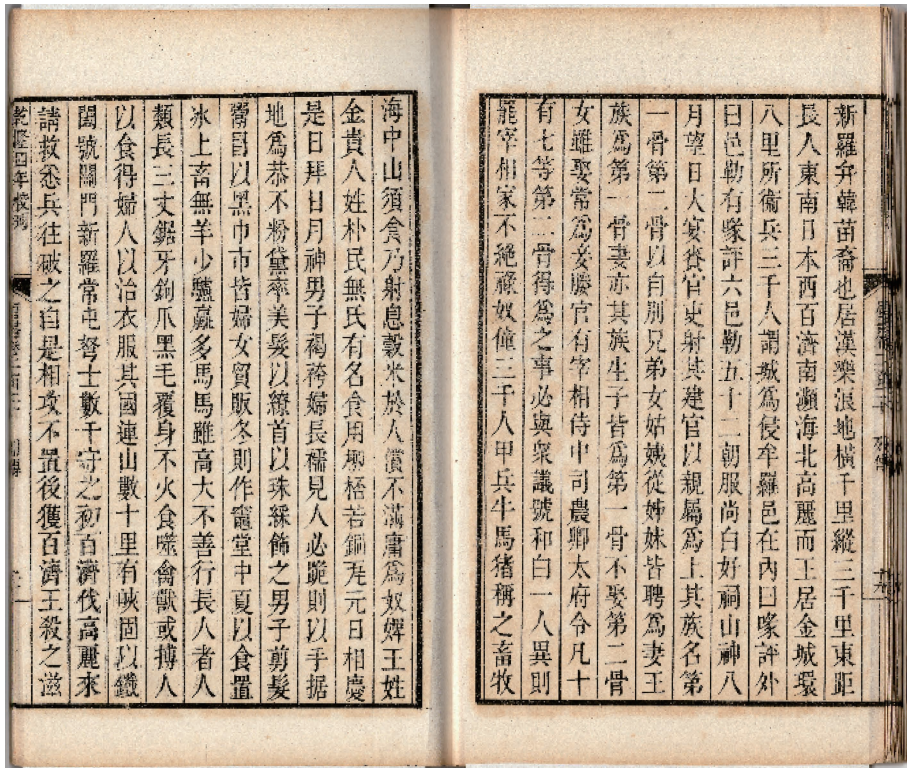


Figure 1. In volume 220 of the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Bainaben 百衲本 edition), the entry about “Big People” (*chojin* 長人).

surviving on the Silla side, it becomes clear that in the area of Silla’s northeastern border frontier there lived groups of the Mohe 靺鞨 people, inhabitants of the Balhae kingdom 渤海, and that Silla, in the latter half of the 7th century, had placed on that border some kind of military installation. This was even termed a “barrier gate,” or at times an “iron barrier fort” (Ch. *tianguancheng* 鐵関城). Histories also record that the early half of the 8th century saw an increase in military tensions with Balhae, and that Silla accordingly strengthened and repaired those of its military facilities oriented towards this region. In other words, when the Big People legend reached Tang China around the mid-8th century, on Silla’s northeastern border frontier, there did in fact exist a military installation named after an iron gate, and military tensions between Silla and Balhae were indeed on the rise.

Yet what population did these “Big People” represent? There are surviving records that place this “barrier gate” on Silla’s northeastern frontier, in the Silla-period Jeongcheon district 井泉郡 (modern Tŏkwŏn district 德源郡, Hamgyŏng Namdo province 咸境南道, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea). It lay on modern Wŏnsan 元山 Bay, to whose north—northeast of the gate itself—lay

the region of Balhae, whose people were, no doubt, identical with the legend's giants. As such legend had it, these Big People were massive of stature and shaped in the manner of birds and beasts, eaters of men and kidnapers of women: a description that indicates its targets were the objects of fear, possessors of a cosmology beyond the understanding of the legend's intended audience. It is probable that the situation of military tension on the Sillan frontier had much to do with the creation of the Big People legend. A "fantastic creatures"-type legend that painted them as such giants only makes sense if understood as a reflection of how Sillans living on the northeastern Sillan borderlands tended to think about people of the Balhae region.

In addition to such military tensions, part of the reason behind the spread of such monstrous images seems to lay in the peculiar methods of contact employed on this frontier region. In other words, at a fundamental level, there was something in their very way of encountering one another that stoked fears about people on the other side of the border. For example, the ancient Korean historical text *Samguk sagi* 三国史記 preserves mention of an 886 incident in which at Bokchin 北鎭 (a Silla military outpost), people from areas to the north came and hung from a tree a slab of wood bearing the simple message "SEEK TRADE"—whereupon they fled.² The attitude towards interaction we glimpse in this act is a preference for "silent trade," a strategy for pursuing mutual commerce even while shunning direct contact. Most likely it was precisely such a situation, and the anxiety and fear it might encourage towards inhabitants on the border's farther side, that led eventually to the latter's portrayal as monstrosities.

Indeed, when set against the customs of this region in the northeastern part of the Korean peninsula, the physical details even of fantastic aspects in descriptions of the Big People become easier to explain. In the mid-18th-century gazetteer *Taengnji* 挾里誌 by Yi Jung-hwan 李重煥, we find the following passage about the people dwelling in this region, which had by then been incorporated into the Joseon Kingdom:

The mountains and rivers of this region are steep. The soil is poor, and millet and barley are the only cereals. There is no cotton cloth, and they cover themselves in the pelts of dogs. The customs they have for surviving cold and hunger are like those of the Jurchen (Nüzhen 女真) people to the north.

It is recorded that at the time, the inhabitants of this region would seek cotton cloth from the southern part of the peninsula, acquiring it by bartering for it with specialty products of their own like ginseng and marten pelts. Descriptions in the Big People legend like "covered in black hair" and "human women they capture and force to mend their clothing" seem to have been made to reflect the customs of this region, where even up to the 18th century they lacked cotton

² *Samguk sagi*, vol. 11, "Silla Chronicle" 新羅本紀, Year 12 of the reign of King Heongang 憲康 [886], "Spring" entry.



Figure 2. A Mongolian Yamaraja (Emma 閻魔). Artist unknown, late 19th-early 20th century. In the Bogd-khaan Palace Museum. <http://www.bogdkhaanpalace.mn/>

It is difficult to find images that match the representations of Big People given in the *Xin Tangshu*. From this picture, however, one can understand that the features ascribed to Big People, from their “mountain-like” straight-standing hair to their “teeth like fangs, and nails like sickles,” find their source in the iconography of such fantastic beings. N. Tsultem. *Mongol zurag*. Ulan-Bator, 1986.

clothing and dressed themselves in dog pelts. It might thus be said that legends about the “Big People,” while based ultimately on the customs of those living in this region, were a product of Sillan imaginations, distilled from the absence of actual interactions with people on the border area, and the simultaneous presence there of real Silla-Balhae military tension. (Figure 2)

One final point worth noting in connection with the origins of the Big People legend concerns the nature of the Silla state during the period from the first half to the middle of the 8th century, when military tensions with both Balhae and Japan had risen. The era of King Gyeongdök 景德 (742–64), during which the Tang court sent Wei Yao 魏曜 as envoy to Silla, was also an era when policies for the centralization of power were being pursued across a number of fronts. The international tension that continued in East Asia from 720 to 750 had put pressure on Silla to strengthen its political system internally. The Big People legend may thus be seen as a kind of externalizing discourse, spun out by the age’s tendency to strengthen the political core.