The Legacy of Long-Gone States: China, Korea and the Koguryo Wars

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By Andrei Lankov

In Helsinki on 10 September 2006, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun met Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Since the summit took place when the two leaders were attending the ASEM forum, they did not have much time to talk, so they had to concentrate on the most important issues in bilateral relations.

Roh Moo-hyun and Wen Jiabao in Helsinki (Reuters)

What were these issues? As the official press release revealed, the two leaders spent a good part of their meeting talking about ancient history, in the most literal sense. President Roh expressed his dissatisfaction with some conclusions of Chinese archeological teams and the publications of a provincial research center dealing with events of some two thousand years ago.

This sudden outburst of high-level interest in bygone eras is understandable, since a new round in the "history wars" between Korea and China erupted in early September, and its participants are deadly serious and very emotional. To an outsider, their struggle may appear somewhat bizarre; after all, the major objects of this conflict are the long-extinct kingdoms of Koguryo and Parhae, which existed in the first millennium AD in what are now China's northeast and North Korea. But these ostensibly academic and abstract topics mask politically charged issues: what to do with the ethnic Koreans in China; how to handle the rapidly growing influence of Korean corporations, NGOs and missionaries in northeast China; and what sort of border should exist between China and a potentially unified Korea? In the contemporary East Asian cultural and political context, the events of some fifteen centuries ago are widely perceived as still relevant.

One should not be too surprised about such a politically charged approach to ancient history. Since time immemorial, East Asian officials and historians have unceasingly interpreted, rewritten and distorted history, crafting it to serve the agendas of the day. The same can be said of leaders and historians in many other regions, but the Confucian worldview, with its heavy emphasis on historical precedent and moral lessons to be drawn from history, is especially conducive to such an approach.

In more recent times, East Asia has also seen the spread of an intense, state-centered nationalism. It appeared in Japan when that country began to embrace all things modern under the Meiji regime of the late nineteenth century. That was the heyday of beliefs in a national destiny and social Darwinism, so it is perhaps natural that strong nationalist overtones became part of the modern ideological package. That remains the case in both China and Korea, where for all practical purposes, nationalism is still the core of the dominant ideologies. Expressions of nationalism in

authoritarian, post-Communist China are necessarily different from such expressions in capitalist and democratic South Korea, but the two countries share a nationalized and politicized approach to history. [1]

Europeans loved such things before World War I, in the days when textbooks told of "our ancestors the Gauls," but the bitter experience of the two World Wars, and the sense of shared destiny after 1945, contributed to the eventual decline of such feelings. In East Asia, however, historical nationalism remains a powerful instrument of politics and a source of deep and explosive emotions.

What is Koguryo, these days also frequently spelled Goguryeo? In the first centuries AD, several rival kingdoms emerged in the Korean Peninsula and adjacent parts of China. Koguryo, Silla and Paekje were the most powerful among them. During the next few centuries these kingdoms fought for supremacy, until the kingdom of Silla eventually won, unifying the southern and central parts of the Korean Peninsula under its rule in the late seventh century.

Koguryo lost and ceased to exist, and a kingdom called Parhae (or Bohai or Balhae) rose to dominate much of its former territory. The Parhae population included a number of former Koguryo subjects. Parhae itself would collapse in the tenth century, with its northern regions being incorporated into Korea, which by that time was ruled by a new Koryo dynasty.

There is no doubt that the present-day dispute represents a case of retro-projection of modern identities. The real-life Koguryoans would have been surprised or even offended to learn that, in the future, they would be perceived by Koreans as members of the same community as their bitter enemies from Silla. Describing Koguryo as Chinese or Korean is as misleading as, say, describing medieval Brittany as French or English or Irish (even though France, Britain and Ireland all have something to do with the long-extinct Celtic duchy located in what is now France).

There is also the little-acknowledged fact that the few surviving Koguryo words seem to demonstrate that Koguryoans did not speak a language ancestral to modern Korean. The language of Silla was indeed proto-Korean, but known Koguryo words have the closest analogues in early Japanese. The only research book on the Koguryo language is Christopher Beckwith's Koguryo: The Language of Japan's Continental Relatives (Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2004). Not all linguists would agree with Beckwith's conclusion, but it is shared by the majority of experts. This is never mentioned by the participants in the heated history discussion.

The first round of the Koguryo confrontation began in 2002, when the Chinese government initiated a generously funded Northeast History Project, ostensibly aimed at restoring the cultural and historic heritage of China's northeast. The project had a political agenda as well: it was aimed at strengthening the association between China proper and the northeast region, which until the seventeenth century experienced Chinese control only occasionally. Even after the early seventeenth century, the area remained the Manchu territory; ethnic Chinese (Han) farmers were not allowed to settle permanently there until the 1880s.

In 2004, the Koreans discovered that both Koguryo and the succeeding state of Parhae were presented in new Chinese-language books as parts of China, as "minority states" that existed

within the supposedly single and unified Chinese nation. Statements to this effect even appeared on the website of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. It still seems to be the official Beijing line, even though not all Chinese scholars accept it. (Their dissenting voices are enthusiastically cited by the Korean media these days.)

A major diplomatic outburst followed the discovery of China's official stance, and the South Korean diplomats demanded explanations. The official Chinese line was that the position of the Northeast History Project had nothing to do with state policy—a statement that would bring a smile to the face of anyone with even a passing knowledge of how Chinese history comes to be written. Finally, in August 2004, the two sides reached an agreement: the bureaucrats promised to refrain from waging "history wars" and leave the arguments to the historians. South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon told the National Assembly that Seoul and Beijing had reached a five-point "verbal understanding" to solve the dispute: "China said it was mindful of the fact that the Koguryo issue has emerged as a serious problem between the two nations. Both sides shared the view that this historical issue should not undermine bilateral relations." [2] It was also reported that a senior Korean diplomat said, on condition of anonymity, that China had pledged not to "lay claim" to Koguryo in its history textbooks, which were to be revised soon. [3]

For the next couple of years things appeared quite calm, but the issue was not forgotten. China began to promote tourism to the Koguryo sites and also included Paektusan, or Baekdu Mountain (Chinese: Changbaishan)—considered a sacred symbol by the Korean nationalists—on the list of the "famous mountains of China," a simple gesture that significantly boosted Chinese tourism in the disputed areas. China also applied to the United Nations to register the mountain, which is divided in half by the international border, as a "Chinese historic site."

Koreans answered with the array of projects aimed at presenting Koguryo as a glorious and inseparable part of Korean history, attempting to appropriate it once and for all. Among other things, a special foundation was created to disseminate money among those domestic and foreign scholars who would promote "historically correct" views of the ancient kingdom (there being no question as to which views qualified as "historically correct").

On the popular front, the major Korean TV networks invested heavily in producing a series that would bring the heroes of Koguryo into every Korean's living room. MBC produced the hugely successful Chu Mong, a sixty-part series about the legendary founder of Koguryo, and SBS shot Yongae Somun, which told of a general who led the Koguryo armies in the initially successful wars against the Chinese empire. The political context of those dramas, and their message, was obvious. Chong Ok-ja, a professor of history at Seoul National University, wrote, "It seems that the current dramas which deal with heroes of ancient history were produced in response to the [Chinese] Northeast History Project. The peculiar character of all these dramas is their bellicosity. Their heroes spend all their time making wars and fighting with swords." [4] The Chinese predictably retaliated by preventing the Seoul producers from shooting these series in China, thus depriving them of cheap sets and props.

Koguryo tombs. DPRK stamp

All of this indicated that the 2004 truce was unlikely to hold for long, and that indeed proved to be the case: the summer of 2006 was marked by new battles in the "history wars." The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in essence a government agency, issued a collection of eighteen research papers dealing with various issues in northeast regional history. Some of the claims the researchers make are probably well-founded (although not necessarily to the liking of the Korean nationalist historians), while many others are clearly new attempts at manipulating the distant past to serve some current political interests of the Chinese state.

Among the statements that are perhaps more credible, but still heavy with political connotations, are attempts to re-emphasize the significance of the Ki-ja (Chinese Ji-zi), who for centuries was seen as the founder of Ancient Choson (Kochoson) kingdom, supposedly the first Korean state. According to a number of Chinese chronicles compiled before the beginning of the Christian era, this state was founded around the tenth century BC by Ki-ja, a lord of the overthrown Shang-Yin dynasty who did not accept the new Zhou regime and fled east. The chronicles also state that Ancient Choson maintained tributary relations with Zhou.

This story was repeated in all Korean history books until about a century ago. However, with the growth of nationalism, it became "politically incorrect" to believe that the first Korean state had been founded by a Chinese, so in the twentieth century the Korean nationalist historians began to promote an alternative myth, also present in early texts, which insisted that the kingdom was actually founded by Tangun, not a Chinese loyalist but rather a son of a god and a female bear (obviously a local). Nowadays, Chinese scholars are reviving the Ki-ja/Ji-zi story, emphasizing the alleged Chinese roots of Korean nationhood. Since both foundation myths are present in the ancient texts, supporters of the rival nationalisms argue over which parts of the same sources should be seen as authentic, and which should be rejected as "false." Needless to say, historians who are political ideologues know the "right" answer well before they start their research.

Among the more dubious claims of the new Chinese publications is that the collapse of Koguryo in AD 668, under joint attack by the Chinese Tang and Silla forces, was "a unification war in which Tang conquered Koguryo." This description, consistent with the claim that Koguryo was a "local national minority state of northeast China," bolsters the notion that Ancient Choson was "the beginning of China's northeast history on the Korean Peninsula." There are also claims about the borders of many Chinese states that allegedly extended into Korean territory; after all, Koguryo, which is now being presented as a "Chinese minority state," controlled the entire northern half of the Korean Peninsula at one time. In short, the major aim of China's official historians has been to present the tribes and states that once inhabited present-day Manchuria and Korea as inseparable parts of China.

Once the Korean media noticed the new publications, Chinese officials tried to control the damage. On 5 September 2006, the official spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign ministry stated, "The materials published by the Academy of Social Sciences are no more than the results of scholars' research . . . The Chinese government will strive to promote friendly relations with all neighbouring countries." [5]

Needless to say, few people in Korea accepted that these new actions of Chinese researchers were merely the result of academic curiosity, and general outrage followed. Noisy demonstrations took place in front of the Chinese embassy. Some ultra-nationalists even bit, chewed and then burned a Chinese flag in front of the cameras. President Roh decided to raise the issue during the recent summit with the Chinese chief executive, and Korean newspapers of all

persuasions ran articles very critical of the Chinese positions. China's actions were widely seen as a unilateral breach of the 2004 agreement.

South Korean protester at the Chinese embassy in Seoul, 7 September 2006 (chosun.com)

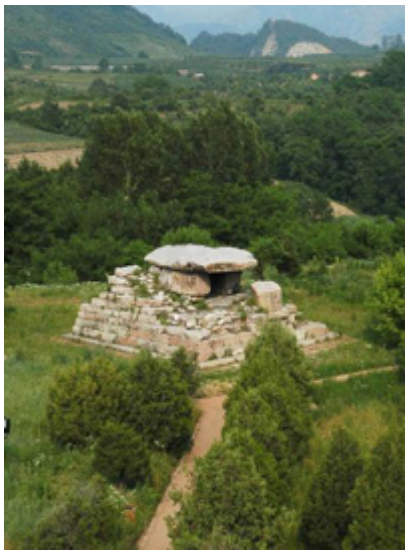
And what are the reasons for the persistence of Chinese historians (or rather Chinese officials, whose instructions scholars follow)? In one sense, Chinese historians have merely been writing about Koguryo in exactly the same way as they write about all other states that once existed in what is now the People's Republic of China. They assert that irrespective of race, culture and ethnicity, all states that ever existed within the current PRC borders were parts of China. According to the official line, China has always been one nation; even though the area now claimed as China might have included a number of non-Chinese ethnic groups, these "minorities" were simply participants in one great Chinese commonwealth. Such statements have nothing to do with real history, and are clearly directed against the ever-present threat of local nationalism, separatism and irredentism. To some extent similar trends exist in most countries. What is striking about the Chinese case is that contemporary identity is projected onto the very ancient past, making it possible to include cultures that clearly had nothing to do with present-day China in the linguistic and cultural sense, such as the ancient states of Tibet.

One cannot help but ask, however, why the claims about Koguryo came to be advanced only in the past few years. There is no doubt that both the earlier battle in the "history wars" and the current round were started by China. What prompted such a policy in the early twenty-first century, when such statements were bound to provoke outrage in Seoul? The move is especially strange considering that the general perception of the Chinese in South Korea has been quite benign. Unlike the increasingly unpopular Americans, the Chinese have not been seen as a threat and an irritant—except in the context of this clash over ancient history. At first glance, it appears as if the Chinese have shot themselves in the foot for no apparent reason. A more careful look at the current situation, however, indicates that the recent "history offensive" might be based on some pressing political calculation.

The most likely explanation is that China is considering political intervention in North Korea—a possibility that has been discussed by South Korean and some Western experts in recent years. As mentioned, the Koguryo southern border roughly matched the present-day boundary between the prosperous South and impoverished North. It seems that the collapse of North Korea is not something the Chinese would be happy about for obvious geopolitical reasons. The growing likelihood of the emergence of a unified and democratic, perhaps pro-US Korea just across the border from China is also not particularly good news for Beijing strategists, so it would make sense to prevent it from happening.

It might not be incidental that China's first "history offensive" began around 2003, more or less at the same time as a sudden increase in Chinese activity in North Korea: from 2000 to 2005, the amount of trade between China and North Korea tripled, going from US$488 million in 2000 to US$1,581 million in 2005. [6] Chinese companies became very active in establishing joint ventures in North Korea, largely dealing with the development of mineral resources and/or transportation infrastructure.

Beijing seems to be preparing contingency plans for a major domestic crisis in North Korea. Needless to say, we are unlikely to learn about the content of these plans in the near future. However, such plans could well include installation of a pro-Chinese puppet regime in Pyongyang, and perhaps would require involvement of Chinese civilian and even military personnel (ostensibly on a humanitarian mission, as distributors of aid and maintainers of order, but actually as supporters of a future post-Kim regime). Of course, the drawing up of such plans does not mean that they will ever be implemented, and the chances of immediate collapse of the North Korean state are not very high. But obviously preparations for such an eventuality have been deemed necessary, and an advance into North Korea would require psychological and cultural justification, not least within China itself. Thus, presenting what is now North Korea as an ancient and integral part of China might create the political and psychological environment conducive to such plans.



Photograph in Chinese claim to Koguryo World Heritage site.

But there is another potential problem that might have prompted Beijing official scholars to revisit issues nearly fifteen centuries old. This is the recent territorial claims of some South Korean groups and NGOs. Some more radical Korean nationalist historians have long paid attention to the "Manchurian question," insisting that the vast lands of China's northeast, which once were realms of the Koguryo rulers, should be returned to their "lawful owner"—that is, to the present-day Korean state. A book by Seoul professor An Ch'Ç'n entitled "Manchuria is Our Land," first published in 1993, has enjoyed wide readership. [7]

Korean response to China's world heritage proposal

The Korean claims to Manchuria are strictly unofficial, but this cannot quite be said of claims to the Kando (Chinese: Jiandao) area. Kando is a large part of what is now known as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, near the point where the borders of Russia, China and North Korea meet. This area has a large population of ethnic Koreans, the overwhelmingly majority of whom are Chinese citizens and descendants of settlers who moved to the area in relatively recent times, after the 1880s. In the early 1900s, the somewhat uncertain legal standing of Kando made it the object of a low-profile territorial dispute between China and Korea, although in those days, both governments were considering issues more urgent than the fate of a small piece of real estate somewhere in the distant corners of their domains. In 1909, the Japanese, acting "on behalf" of the Koreans, agreed to Chinese sovereignty in the area.

In recent years it has become clear that a large number of Koreans are demanding the revision of the 1909 treaty, and unlike the claims about Korean sovereignty in Manchuria, these claims to Kando have some official backing. In late 2004, when the first round of the "history wars"

reached its height, a group of 59 South Korean lawmakers even introduced a bill that declared the 1909 Sino-Japanese treaty "null and void" and demanded recognition of Korean territorial rights over Kando. In all probability this was done to counter Chinese claims over Koguryo, but true to the usual pattern of an argument between nationalists, the Chinese might now be inclined to answer this bold (and quasi-official) statement with an even bolder one.

A Kando Return Association is now actively promoting claims to Kando unofficially, but rather stridently (their map of Korea-as-it-should-be is well worth a look: www.gando.or.kr (http://www.gando.or.kr/)). Some major media outlets have also been supportive of the "Return Kando!" campaign. In 2004, during the first rounds of the "history wars," Newsmaker, an influential mainstream South Korean weekly, even ran a special section under the title "Kando is Our Land." The present author has had a number of opportunities to learn in private talks with South Korean officials and diplomats that some of them do take the Kando claim seriously, and believe that this vast area might somehow be acquired at some point at the future.

Needless to say, such claims—which obviously have backing from at least some South Korean politicians—make Chinese authorities nervous. It does not help that the claimed territory already has a large Korean presence, with ethnic Koreans constituting about a third of all Kando residents. At this stage it seems that residents' loyalties overwhelmingly remain with Beijing, but growing Korean interest in the area is unnerving for Chinese policy planners: over the past decade, the three provinces of the Chinese northeast have become a major attraction for Korean businesses as well as an area of active proselytizing by Korean Christian missionaries. Hence, preemptive claims from Beijing might be seen as a way to confirm Chinese supremacy in the area, as well as to remind the local Koreans of the alleged "eternal multiculturalism" of the Chinese state.

We cannot currently be certain whether Bejjing's recent attempts to appropriate a long-gone state are driven by defensive or offensive considerations. In either case, this policy might backfire, and Beijing planners probably know it. Over the past fifteen years the periodic outbursts of nationalist wrath in South Korea have been aimed at either the Japanese or the Americans, while a surprising amount of goodwill (not to say naivete) has existed toward China. If Koreans talked about "aggressive designs," these were invariably designs of Washington and Tokyo. Recent events, however, have attracted attention to the gradual Chinese encroachment and will damage the previously rosy perception of China. By some accounts, however, the decision-makers in Beijing have decided that this risk is worth taking.

The influential South Korean daily Donga Ilbo recently published the following commentary: "[South Korean] academic circles are urging the government to respond faster and more aggressively, saying that the best defense is a good offense. That means Korea should work on not just defending its history of the kingdoms of Ancient Choson, Puyo, Koguryo and Palhae but on expanding Korea's historic spectrum to include the history of Yelu, Khitan and Mongol tribes and launching a Korean version of the Northeast History Project." [8]

Interestingly, while asserting that the best defense is offense, the commentary also suggests that the "expanding" Korean history would include even Mongolia. It seems that for quite a long time to come, impartial observers will be treated to increasingly improbable claims by both sides. Such attempts to appropriate long-gone states and tribes might seem weirdly amusing, but the passions behind these claims are, alas, only too real, as well as potentially dangerous for all participants.

Notes

[1] For a good example of how some arcane issues become politicized in the East Asian cultural context, one might have a look at the history of the bronze drums, whose "national ownership" is heatedly disputed by Vietnamese and Chinese archeologists. See Han, Xiaorong. "Who Invented the Bronze Drum? Nationalism, Politics, and a Sino-Vietnamese Archaeological Debate of the 1970s and 1980s," Asian Perspectives, Spring 2004, No. 1. For an example of retro-projecting modern identities deep into the past, see Sautman, Barry. "Peking Man and the politics of paleoanthropological nationalism in China," Journal of Asian Studies, 2001, No. 1.

[2] Korea Times, 24 August 2004

[3] Korea Times, 24 August 2004

[4] Tonga Ilbo, 1 September 2006

[5] Kyonghyang sinmun, 6 September 2006

[6] See: Yi Yong-hun, "Ch'oekun Puk-Chung kyongje kwangye-ui t'ukjing-kwa sisachom" (Economic relations between North Korean and China, their specifics and implications). In KDI Pukan kyongje ribyu, 2006, No. 3, p.4.

[7] An Ch'on, Manchu-nun uri ttang, Seoul, Inkan sarang, 1993.

[8] Tonga Ilbo, 7 September 2006

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For a complementary work on nationalism and history, see Yonson Ahn, Competing Nationalisms: The mobilisation of history and archaeology in the Korea-China wars over Koguryo/Gaogouli (http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1837).

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