

Competing Nationalisms: The mobilisation of history and archaeology in the Korea-China wars over Koguryo/Gaogouli

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Abstract: This article explores how and why history and archaeology have been mobilised and utilised in nationalist projects in East Asia, especially in the case of the Koguryo dispute between Korea and China. Koguryo (Korean)/Gaogouli (Chinese), an ancient kingdom in the period between 37 BC and AD 668, encompassed a vast area from central Manchuria to south of Seoul. According to the “Northeast Project”, launched in China in 2002, Gaogouli was an ethnic regime in an ancient Chinese province. In contrast, Korean historians of nationalist persuasion view Koguryo as an ancestral state of the Korean historical tradition and a foundation of the national identity. Unity, continuity and coherence are claimed in both communities through invoking the history and culture of Koguryo/Gaogouli. Koguryo/Gaogouli relics which were put on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004 are pivotal in the contestation between China and Korea. In both, the ancient relics are held to show the distinctiveness of a national past linked to the present. This article argues that the contested history of Koguryo/Gaogouli should be examined as a site of historical hybridity between China and Korea, rather than being claimed as a site of exclusive national history.

Among recent disputes over history textbook revisions, territorial claims in East Asia, there exists a very central conflict and ongoing

debate between China and Korea. It concerns the history and heritage of Koguryo/Gaogouli (37BC-AD668) [1], which is often referred to as one of the ancient Three Kingdoms of Korea, along with Paekche and Silla. Koguryo/Gaogouli encompassed a vast area from central Manchuria to south of Seoul at the height of its power, around the fifth century (Im Ki-hwan 2004: 98).



Figure 1 : Map of Koguryo/Gaogouli

(Source) Kim, Lena ed., *Koguryo Tomb Murals*, Seoul: ICOMOS-Korea, 2004: 4 (Courtesy of ICOMOS-Korea).

In so-called “history wars”, both China and Korea claim that Koguryo/Gaogouli is historically and exclusively theirs. They mobilise ancient history and archaeology to substantiate their claims to sovereignty over the contested past. Historiographical and archaeological constructs of nationhood have been deployed in these disputes. The conflict has important implications for the use and perception of history and archaeology.

1. Koguryo history and the “Northeast Project”

Since February 2002, the Centre for the Study of Borderland History and Geography under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has been working on a five-year state-funded project called the “Serial Research Project on the History and Current Status of the Northeast Border Region,” otherwise referred to as the “Northeast Project”. This project deals with various problems related to history, geography and ethnic issues in China’s Northeastern provinces. There are three provinces in this region: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. Under the project, research on the ancient history of the region is focused on the kingdoms of Kojoson (BC 2333 - BC 108), Koguryo (BC 37 - AD 668), and Parhae (AD 698 - AD 926). The kingdom that is receiving the most extensive attention in the Northeast Project is Koguryo, which is currently home to large ethnic Korean communities in the Northeastern Provinces as well as to Mongols, Hui, a few Manchus and large numbers of “Han” migrants from North China. The various tribes that inhabited Koguryo are regarded by the project’s historians as among the many minorities that were eventually absorbed into “Greater China”. Since about two-thirds of Koguryo territory lies within today’s China, its history is considered a part of Chinese national

history.

As early as 1986, Chinese historian Sun Jinji (1986) suggested that Koguryo is separate from the history of the Three Kingdoms in the Korean Peninsular. He argued that “the people of Buyeo and Goguryeo had the same lineage as the Chinese in the Northeast region, while the Korean people were a part of the Silla lineage.” (Sun 1989 cited in Lee 2005: 189) Thus, Koguryo is considered to be affiliated to China in his work. According to Mark Byington (2004-a), from 1993 there was a sharp increase in the number of articles that specify Koguryo as one of the minority nationalities of ancient China, and an inseparable part of Chinese history. This trend appeared to peak in 1997, and gradually tapered off in 2000. At the 1993 academic conference in Ji’an the North Korean historian Pak Sihyong directly challenged the Chinese view that the kingdom is an integral part of Chinese history. The Chinese historian Sun Jinji issued a rebuttal and subsequently published a number of papers to reinforce his position. [2] Aside from Sun Jinji, Ma Dazheng, Chi Tiehua, Zhang Bibo, and Zhang Boquan have been incorporating Koguryo history into “Chineseness”. But Chinese scholars are not of one voice on this issue. There are Chinese historians who acknowledge Koguryo’s “Koreanness”, for example Jiang Feifei and Wang Xiaofu, as well as those who acknowledge Koguryo history as being shared by both Korea and China within “a framework of the dual elements of a single history” (*yishi liangyong lun*), such as Jiang Mengshan, Liu Zimin, and Xu Deyuan (Sun Jinji 2004-a).

The Chinese argument for Koguryo’s historical heritage in the Northeast Project is based on two main points: the first is that the Koguryo state grew out of the Han Chinese commandery of Xuantu. Not only Koguryo (37 BC - AD 668) but also Parhae (Korean)/Bohai (Chinese) (AD 698 - AD 926) are considered to be founded by Mohe (Chinese)/Malgal (Korean) and belonged to the Tang Dynasty according to a history

textbook in China. One of the Chinese history textbooks says:

“During the Sui and Tang, the Mohe lived along the Songhua and Heilong Rivers. In the second half of the seventh Century the Sumo-Mohe tribe grew stronger. At the end of the seventh century Da Zuerong, the leader of the Sumo, united all tribes and formed a government. Later the Tang Emperor Xuanzong proclaimed Da Zuerong King of the Bohai Commandery. After this proclamation, the Sumo-Mohe government called itself Bohai.” [3]



Figure 2: Map of Bohai/Parhae

(Source)

<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Alteration/northeast.html>

(Courtesy of Ulrich Theobald)

Chinese historians such as Sun Hong and Zhong Fu claim that Han Chinese culture had been absorbed and integrated into Koguryo, and eventually became mainstream culture in Koguryo. As a result, the commonalities in culture among the Three Kingdoms, Koguryo (37 BC - AD 668), Paekche (18 BC - AD 660),

and Silla (57 BC - AD 935) are viewed as stemming not from their membership in the same ethnic group, but from their absorption into Han culture (Sun Hong 2004, cited in Sun Jinji 2004-a). Furthermore, Sun Jinji and Sun Hong claim that some remains of the tombs from the ancient period in Ji'an are not Koguryo's but are those of the Han or Xianbei (Chinese)/Sonbi (Korean) (Sun Jinji and Sun Hong 2004). Korean historians and archaeologists of the nationalist persuasion offer a different story. For example Kim Wonyong (1983: 2-3, quoted in: Nelson 1995: 219-220), a leading South Korean archaeologist, assumes that the Three Kingdoms, despite their differences, were founded by Yemaek descendants who entered Korea from Manchuria in about 1000BC. Some Korean historians, such as Yeo Ho-kyu (2004) and Choe Beob-jong (2004), believe that both the origins of the Korean people and the formation of Koguryo as a state are directly related to the Yemaek tribe, which is clearly distinguishable from the Tungus, Mongol and Turkic tribes. [4] Korean nationalist historians and archaeologists consider the Yemaek to represent the origins of Korean nationality. This formation of the Korean people and the cultural unity and continuity of Korea from a single ancestral antecedent has been of great concern for nationalist historical narratives in Korea.

The second point emphasised by scholars associated with the Northeast Project is that Gaogouli/Koguryo constituted, in the words of Ma Dazheng, “an influential ethnic group in China’s border area in northeastern China between the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24) and the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907)”. [5] A contrasting representation of Koguryo can be seen in the “National History” textbook for high school students in South Korea:

“Based on internal reforms by King Sosurim, Koguryo launched a large external conquest to Manchuria during the reign Great King

Kwanggaet'o As a consequence of the continuing territorial expansion policy, Koguryo reigned supreme over Northeast Asia. Koguryo occupied huge territories of Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula and established a great empire with a complete political system. It came to compete with China on an equal basis." [6]

This Korean history textbook stresses Koguryo's conquest and territorial expansion against China. Koguryo is represented as the supreme power of Northeast Asia, rivalling China's Sui and Tang dynasties, rather than a tributary state under Chinese rule. Thus, the contrasting views of Koguryo's position in history between Korea and China are striking, while each presumes a clearly delineated geographical and national border between "Korea" and "China" in ancient times, and a linear national history to the present.

The official Chinese position regarding the proper historical place of Koguryo is a reading back of contemporary Chinese views of the unifying multiethnic nation that is composed of Han Chinese and fifty-five other ethnic minorities rooted in antiquity, as Mark Byington (2004-b) maintains. In other words, the way minority nationalities are today conceived as forming part of a "Greater Chinese nation" has been imposed on the remote past. However, historically, rulers and officials viewed neighbouring peoples and states on the northeastern and other border areas of the Chinese empire as "barbarians". Contemporary Chinese policymakers are keen to raise awareness of the common traits as a means to integrate diverse peoples and ethnic groups into the Han Chinese historical legacy by associating the cultural and historical attributes of border populations with national "core" areas. This is especially apparent in efforts to incorporate the history, memories and symbols of the Korean minority in the Northeast Provinces within China's "national history". The Northeast Project can thus be

understood as an attempt to construct a unitary national history and identity. Assimilating ethnicity into nationality through positing a common history is clearly evident. Here the multiethnic state can be understood as "an organism" in which each ethnic community becomes an inseparable organ of the body. (Campbell 1992: 87-92) It is a historical reading that also has implications for the state's attempts to deal with demands for more autonomy or independence of ethnic groups, notably the Korean minority in China.

The view of many Korean nationalist scholars is that the Northeast Project is part of an aggressive Chinese move to claim territory and history whose implications loom particularly large in the event of a North Korean collapse. [7] They argue that the Project is clearly concerned with potential border issues and territorial claims that could impact in the event either of the collapse of North Korea or reunification of the two Koreas. (Choe Kwang-sik 2004-a) In fact, the Chinese are concerned about potential political instability in the border regions in the event of a North Korean collapse, particularly a flood of refugees and territorial boundary disputes. [8] Such territorial concern has been expressed by Chinese historian Sun Jinji (2004-a). Maintaining the integrity and stability of the nation constitutes another concern in the background of launching the Northeast Project. Scholars such as Quan Zhezhu (2003), Sun Jinji, Kim Hui-kyo (2004) and Mark Byington (2004-a) perceive the launching of the Project as a defensive reaction to preserve China's own territorial integrity and stability.

For their part, Chinese analysts perceive as threatening the nationalistic sentiments of some Koreans in both the North and South. The Korean attachment to, and historical pride in, the former lands of Koguryo and Parhae/Bohai suggests to these Chinese a nationalistic or even irredentist sentiment that demands territorial restoration of Manchuria (Byington

2004-c). In fact, some Korean ultra-nationalists in both the liberal and conservative camps make claims for the “restoration of the lost former territories” (Kim Hui-kyo 2004: 16) meaning Manchuria, that is, the present provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, the interstitial region between China, Russia, and Korea. [9] These territories are regarded as “falsely separated from the organic national community” (Mayall 1994: 270), the counterpart to the Chinese vision of a multiethnic state.

After the Ulsa Treaty of 1905, which put Korea’s foreign affairs under Japanese administration, the Chinese reopened the question over Kando (Korean)/Jiandao (Chinese)/Kanto (Japanese) which is located on the north bank of the Tumen river between Paekdusan and the Yukchin area, north of the Chinese-North Korean border. Eventually Ito Hirobumi, the first Resident General in Korea from 1906 to 1909, signed Kando over to China in 1909. [10] Korean nationalists regard this as an illegal transfer between Japan and China, in exchange for Japan’s exclusive rights to build and control a railway in Manchuria. A group of fifty-nine South Korean Members of Parliament from both ruling and opposition parties submitted a resolution to nullify the Kando Convention to the National Assembly on September 3, 2004. [11] Popular irredentist sentiment in Korea is reified in attempting to recover those parts of Manchuria that are considered to have been part of ancient Korea. In claiming the regions as an integral part of the nation, territoriality fuses with national sentiment.

Indeed, Chinese officials and some historians are concerned by this move on the part of some South Korean legislators and civic groups to nullify the Kando agreement. For instance, Sun Jinji (2004-a) argues that an alteration of the present border cannot be based on claims of ownership a thousand years ago. Here Koguryo history becomes a contested domain of

nationalist power. On the one hand, Sun Jinji understands that both North and South Korea’s attempt to “protect” Koguryo history as Korean history is a preparation for a territorial claim on Kando. On the other hand, Koreans are concerned that the Chinese claim on Koguryo will be used to maintain or expand its territorial claims to Kando when the two Koreas are reunified. [12]

In Korea, it is widely held that the Chinese government and scholars are “conducting a systematic and comprehensive effort to distort the ancient history of Northeast Asia”, seen as “a political assault disguised as an academic endeavour”. [13] Chinese writers have criticised Korean politicising of history. Ma Dazheng emphasises “we do not accept any tendencies or practices in the research into Gaogouli history aimed at politicizing academic studies.” [14] Even though both state that the Koguryo issue should be addressed within an academic and scientific framework, and should not develop into a political or diplomatic dispute between the two countries, this issue recently emerged as the source of a diplomatic row. In April 2004, when the Chinese Foreign Ministry removed references to Koguryo that explained Korea’s Three Kingdom Era from its website, the South Korean Government lodged a formal diplomatic protest with the Chinese authorities. [15]

2. Historical values of Koguryo in Korea

For Koreans, the northern lands of Puyo (Korean)/Fuyu (Chinese), Koguryo and Parhae have been thought of as a spiritual motherland nourishing Korean culture (Byington 2004-c). Amongst the ancient kingdoms, Koguryo has always been treated as an ancestral state within the Korean historical tradition which both nurtures and unites people under one national identity, a feeling that has been particularly strong in North Korea. Thus, across the political spectrum in academia and NGOs, South Koreans have been unanimous in

criticizing China's claim to Koguryo's historical heritage. This has been true in North Korea, as well. A shared Korean nationalism has facilitated North-South cooperation on the issue. Choe Kwang-sik (2004-b), a leading South Korean historian and protester in the Koguryo affair, points out that the Chinese remapping of history could result in:

1. reducing the span of Korean history to less than 2,000 years, thereby losing 700 years of a proud chapter of its history, [16]
2. losing a historical pillar of Korean identity,
3. delimiting the size of Korea's territory to an area south of the Han River.

A transhistorical “we” with timeless qualities is constructed in nationalist narratives. Yoe Hokyū (2004), another South Korean historian, asserts that “it is absolutely clear that the Goguryeo people are ancestors of the Korean people because Korea inherited Goguryeo culture in its entirety.” Koguryo history is thus mobilised to buttress the continuity of the Korean nation-state since the foundation of the nation by Tan'gun, roughly five millennia ago, through to the modern nation-state. [17] The historically recovered ancient past has been powerful in defining contemporary Korean national identity. Thus, the Koguryo issue has led to an escalation in the debate over sites of “ethnic origins” and national continuity in Korea. The concerns over “damaging the origin of the Korean nation fatally” so that Korea becomes “a rootless nation” have been expressed in the media. [18] This maintains the trope that “Our roots define us.”

Protests against claims to the Chineseness of Koguryo have been intense. In December 2003, activist groups in South Korea and overseas launched a public awareness campaign. South Korean civic activists held a series of rallies in protest against the Northeast Project and the Chinese government. The issue has become a

frequent topic on TV and radio. A group of seventeen historical societies across South Korea took joint action against their Chinese counterparts in December 2003. [19] The Society for Korean Ancient History issued a statement condemning China's actions. Rallies have been held outside the Chinese embassy in Seoul. Scores of websites dedicated to the study of Koguryo have sprung up. [20] Korean “netizens” protest and lay emphasis on “Korean spirit” by posting, for example, statements such as this: “as a small country, we have suffered countless hardships and humiliation at the hands of stronger nations, but the spirit of Korea can never be extinguished.” [21] “The Spirit of Koguryo is in the hearts of 80 million Koreans,” reads a wide banner hung in Seoul during a demonstration in January 2004. It was referring to the populations of both North and South, as well as to Koreans living abroad. [22] The Chinese claims to Koguryo have resulted in promoting cooperation between North and South Koreans and the Korean diaspora. The nation is inscribed as one surrounded by others who “steal” “our history and territory”. Collective needs to preserve the community's irreplaceable historical values have been strongly addressed in the face of China's nationalist projects.

Indeed, the two Koreas have competed to establish hegemony and legitimacy as heirs of the Korean nation since the partition in the postwar era. Koguryo antiquities and history embody special political significance in this competition. They denote the legitimacy of political authority and rule in North Korea. Koguryo is eulogised as an embodiment of the true national spirit and depicted as a champion of Koreanness against treacherous pro-foreign Silla in the North Korean official version of history (Petrov 2004). Some North Korean archaeologists deny that “the Han Chinese ever conquered any part of the Korean peninsula.” (Pearson 1978, in Nelson 1995: 229) North Korean historians underline the “self-reliance, uniqueness and superiority of Goguryeo

culture”. (Chin Ho-t’ae 1990) Accordingly, Chinese claims on Koguryo have been strongly denounced as “a pathetic attempt to manipulate history for its own interests” or “intentionally distorting historical facts through biased perspectives” in North Korean media. [23]

Unlike North Korea, Koguryo history as a research topic had not been very popular among historians in South Korea. Studies of ancient history in South Korea have been focused on Silla instead, due mainly to the fact that Silla was located in the South. It was not easy to get access to Koguryo archaeological sites, which are mainly located in former Manchuria and in North Korea, particularly before South Korea and China agreed to diplomatic relationships in 1992. However, the Northeast Project in China resulted in a Koguryo “boom” in South Korea. Since the mid 1990s there has been a proliferation of research and exhibitions on Koguryo history, art or cultural heritage. The South Korean government, countering the China’s Northeast Project, launched the Koguryo Research Foundation (*Goguryeo yonku chaedan*) on the 1st of March, 2004. [24] This Foundation is to be merged into the Northeast Asian History Foundation (*Tongbuga yoksa chaedan*) under the Foreign Ministry in 2006. [25] In addition, ancient history and archaeological remains have become commodities to be consumed. Various commercial products with Koguryo motifs (for example, T-shirts, ties, scarves and PC games) have come on the market in South Korea. TV dramas, musicals, martial arts and commercials all draw upon the glory of Koguryo. [26]

Most of the research on Koguryo in South Korea is similar in approach to that in North Korea, stressing the history and relics as Korea’s and emphasising Koguryo’s “distinctly different historical consciousness from China’s”. (Lee 2005: 172, 183) Only a few Korean historians see Koguryo as a separate

site from both Korea and China. They include Kim Han-kyu (2004) and Lim Jie-hyun (2004) in South Korea and Yi Songsi (2001) in Japan. Kim Han-kyu’s *Yodongsa* (History of Liaodong), published in 2004 in South Korea, generated intense criticism in both South Korea and China. He points out that Liaodong, where Koguryo was located, has its own history which needs to be distinguished from both Korea’s and China’s, and that Liaodong had ties with neighbouring states. In China his work is considered dangerous because it could trigger independence sentiment in Liaodong. In Korea, his work has not been at all welcome since it contradicts the notion that Koguryo is the historical root of Korea.

3. Mobilising archaeology



Figure 3: King Tongmyong’s Mausoleum, North Korea

Not only Koguryo history but also its relics constitute a source of tension between China and Korea. The conflict already surfaced in differences in interpreting the ancient history amongst North Koreans and Chinese in the joint archaeological excavation of the early 1960s . The political implication of archaeologists’ work was demonstrated when the joint archaeological project was halted. Koguryo tomb murals are found on both sides of the Chinese-North Korean border as well as in South Korea (Yeo 2005). So far, in total over 10,000 tombs belonging to the Koguryo

kingdom have been identified in China and Korea. Among those, 90 discovered near Ji'an (the former capital of Koguryo), Jilin province of northeast China, and in the vicinity of Pyongyang and Nampo in South Hwanghae Province in North Korea have wall paintings (Petrov 2004). [27] Both North Korea and China assert ownership of the heritage sites on an ethnic basis. Both applied to UNESCO to have the disputed remains registered as World Heritage sites. South Korea supported the North's bid. Both countries' requests were passed at the World Heritage Committee meeting held in China on the first of July in 2004. [28] Named "The Complex of the Koguryo Tombs," 63 tombs from five areas including the Kangso Three Tombs and Royal Tomb of King Tongmyong, along with 16 tombs containing mural paintings in North Korea, became a World Heritage site. Under the title "Capital Cities and Tombs of the Ancient Koguryo Kingdom", the archaeological remains of three cities (Wunu Mountain City, Guonei City and Wandu Mountain City) and 40 tombs (26 noble tombs, 14 royal tombs), along with the Stone Monument of King Kwanggaet'o in China, have been put on the UNESCO World Heritage List. [29] The Koguryo relics have been co-registered as those of China and North Korea, thus fuelling the debate regarding the "rightful" ownership of the relics. The very next day, a South Korean NGO, Coalition for Peace and Historical Education in Asia (*Ashia p'yonghwawa yoksagyoyuk yondae*), expressed concern that this decision for co-registration made the question of who owns the legacy of Koguryo only fuels the controversy. [30] The syncretistic nature of culture has not been considered in this protest; only the competitive desire to monopolise the "national sites".



Figure 4 : A hunting scene in the Tomb Muyongchong, in Ji'an, located in contemporary Jilin Province, China.



Figure 5: Jars excavated on Mount Mandal, Pyongyang, North Korea.

Koguryo's relics are highly regarded in the rivalry between China and Korea. This indicates that heritage constitutes an influential part of cultural hegemony in East Asia and also, a powerful part of the cultural and historical patrimony of the people, both in Korea and especially in the Northeast Provinces in China. Kang Hyun-sook (2004), professor of Ancient Art in South Korea, maintains the distinctiveness and influence of Koguryo culture in East Asia in underlining that the Koguryo tombs with murals were not mere imitation of their Chinese counterparts and that

they were influenced by Japan's funerary culture. As examples of Koguryo's influence on Japan's funerary culture, the Takamatsu Tomb and the Kitora Tomb in Japan have been cited. [31] She concludes that the influence of Koguryo seen in Japan and the Korean peninsula demonstrates its prominent position as a culturally powerful regional state (Kang 2004: 106-107). As such, the Koguryo archaeological remains represent the legacy and hegemony of regional culture.



Figure 6: A snake crossed with a tortoise. Kanso Middle-sized Mound, 7th Century in the Kitora Tomb in Asukamura, Nara prefecture, Japan.

In any case, the preservation of national heritage and historic relics is considered imperative in establishing hegemony or legitimacy, and in asserting sovereignty over contested territories in both countries. Ariane Perrin (2004), a member of an ICOMOS survey team to North Korean Heritage sites, has expressed concern over North Korea's heavy reconstruction at some of the sites, especially King Tongmyong's Tomb, which did not meet World Heritage Convention criteria for the authenticity and integrity of a cultural site. This is the case in China as well, with the relics in Zhuanghe in Liaoning. [32] The political value of archaeology in the present can be seen in rushed excavation and reconstruction projects that lack adequate research foundations. Here,

archaeology has played a critical role in the battle over the "cultural capital" of the past.

Archaeology is often associated with patriotism in both the "periphery" as well as from the "core". (Hobsbawm 1990) Mass support for cultural patriotism can be seen in response to efforts to preserve national heritage in China. "Relics protection prizes" were offered by the central government in Beijing in December 2003. The prizes were awarded to a total of 31 national level cultural relics authorities for their efforts to protect historical treasures. Ji'an Province where Koguryo archaeological remains are located was one of the award winners, boasting numerous cultural relics from the ancient Gaogouli ruins. [40] This mass support is probably related to recent "regionalism" in Chinese archaeology. Von Falkenhausen (1995: 200) notes the recent "paradigm shift to regionalism from centralism" in Chinese archaeology. This has not, however, undercut cultural nationalism. As he stresses, this regionalism encourages voluntary integration, instead of coercing unity from the centre. (von Falkenhausen 1995: 200, 215) The result is to assist the central government in gaining mass support in cultural patriotism, and to help the local population gain official support and legitimation. Koguryo's archaeological findings from the border regions are correlated with the master narratives of national history, showing the historical and cultural integrity of the borderlands, thereby reinforcing national myths of unity.



Figure 7: The King Kwanggaet'o stele in Ji'an, China

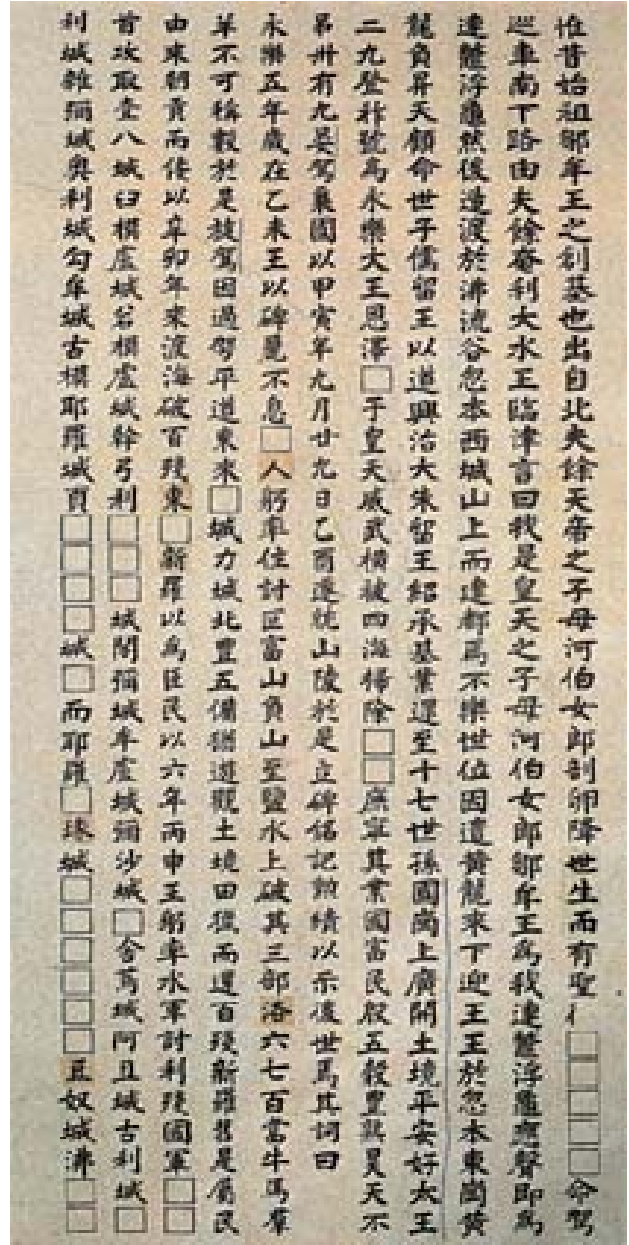


Figure 8: A legend of the founding of Koguryo inscribed on the King Kwanggaet'o stele in Ji'an, China

The monuments and sacred sites which embody ancestral title-deeds and memories are crucial for engendering a common national identity, as Anthony D. Smith (1986: 213) underscores. Among Koguryo relics, especially the King Kwanggaet'o stele in Ji'an, a monument inscribed with Chinese characters extolling the exploits of a king of Koguryo in AD 414,

reinforces national pride in Korea. The stele is interpreted as evidence of a capacity for conquest. It is asserted that “the Koguryo people regarded their kingdom as the centre of the world and took great pride in its position” (Im Ki-hwan 2004: 100). Korean nationalist archaeology pursues evidence of the uniqueness and homogeneity of Korean identity. Sarah Nelson (1995) argues that Korean archaeology has been detrimentally affected by the contemporary political desire to see Korean culture past and the present as distinctive and homogeneous. The “history wars” glorify the heritage of Koguryo and bolster feelings of fraternity. The significance of archaeology, history and territoriality in forming or reinforcing ethnic or national identity is at the centre of this conflict.

4. Problems in the “history wars”

Several problems can be found in the conflicts over Koguryo. One is the rigidity of empiricism. The whole debate is heavily based on the empiricist paradigm, employing archaeological and empirical evidence. The ancient past of Koguryo/Gaogouli is claimed to be reconstructed through forensic research into fragmentary and partial evidence of archaeology and history. This attempt seeks to derive legitimacy from empirical evidence. We have noted, however, that scholars in both China and Korea produce ideologically-laden interpretations of the past that eschew value-neutral scientific or “academic” methods. Their interpretations are not only contradictory, but also equally reinforce nationalist claims. Clearly, the debate has deep roots in the political agendas to maintain hegemony and legitimacy over history and the territory of Koguryo with its important contemporary territorial and political implications. While each criticises the other for abusing history for political purposes, Koguryo is symbolically important for the unity and antiquity of both nation-states. The ancient history of Koguryo has been used as an ideological prop for both,

in order to claim authority and authenticity.

A second problem in the dispute is that it projects the modern nation-state onto ancient times, reconstructing ancient history within the framework of national history. The modern concepts of national territory and nation-state are applied retroactively to the ancient period. Lim Jie-hyun (2004) finds such projections anachronistic. Contemporary views of the ancient past shaped by present needs are often self-serving.

Third, at the centre of the dispute over Koguryo history and relics is the issue of boundaries of national history and heritage that are drawn differently in China and in Korea. Chinese history, heritage and culture are defined from the perspective of its present-day territories and borders over which the state claims sovereignty. Thus, the history and heritage of Koguryo and Parhae are claimed as part of Chinese history. This can be viewed as territorialisation of history. On the other hand, Korean national history is defined by the area where Koreans settled, differentiating Self and Other by “bloodline”. Debates on Koguryo and Parhae history stem from this difference in criteria by which the boundary of national history is determined. For Koreans, Koguryo and Parhae are exclusively their own. Nationalist Korean scholars argue that questions of the historical identity of the ancient kingdom are far more important than contemporary territorial rights. [34] The Chinese Northeast Project is denounced as “a product of a historical perception based on a territory-centred view” (Yoon 2005: 166).

In these “history wars,” national history serves as a clear-cut dividing line between “our history” and “theirs”. The rigidity of national history reproduces the image of the monolithic national “self” and “other”, ignoring the multiplicity of heterogeneous “selves”. Nationalists’ concern for cultural homogeneity leads to an exclusive social closure against the

other. The other's claim on "our" history is branded as stealing, manipulating, or distorting history, so that "we" need to correct and protect or rescue "our" history. "If we forget our history, we are forgetting our roots." [35] In this contextualisation of history, history is read as a moral dichotomy; either correct, i.e good history, or distorted, i.e bad history. However, the interpretation of history needs to be considered as a process rather than as a static entity in a moral judgment.

Last but not least, questions of gender are ignored in mainstream national historiography on Koguryo. National heroes are constructed as masculine: for example, the ancient historical figures like King Kwanggaet'o the Great and his son King Changsu are presented as a source of Korean national pride. Their conquests in the Northeast provinces are attributed to the victory of Korea's virile "national masculinity". Accordingly, in praising masculine achievement in history, women become invisible and images of male domination are reinforced.



Figure 9: King Kwanggaet'o the Great



Figure 10: Tomb of King Changsu

5. "History in between"

Borders can be understood as something which separates and excludes or which binds and includes the communities that share it. This interstitial position of borderlands serves to constitute the intertwined nature of diverse national, political and cultural identities. However, the rigidity of national history cannot permit an understanding of borders which emphasises the variety and permeability of political and cultural boundaries. Self-concepts of pure difference between Chineseness and Koreanness at the present time appear to exclude creolised and multiple narratives of history within the border regions. This is an attempt to "nationalise" frontiers. In the times of the Koguryo kingdom, no clear borders divided the multiple states and people. Borders between Koguryo and Tang or Silla, for example, were fluid and permeable. Cultural and historical hybridity between Koguryo and the Han, Wei and Jin dynasties, which controlled the neighbouring regions of Liaoning and Shandong provinces, as well as between Koguryo and Silla, needs to be mapped onto the cartography of Koguryo. In fact, in his work on Manchuria (1644-1912), which overlaps Koguryo's territory, Elliot underscores that

Manchuria was incorporated once and for all into the larger Chinese geo-body with the Japanese defeat of 1945. Yet he argues that the distinctive identity of both people and region from the Chinese “core”, particularly since the seventeenth century, remains part of the contemporary scene. (Elliot 2000: 635-640) Accordingly, China’s recent refocused attention on the Northeast border regions and efforts to integrate the regions with the rest of the national territory are not irrelevant to understanding the distinctive and complex identity of the Manchu homeland as an interstitial community from the “core”, a region whose history shaped in complex ways the outcomes of multiple peoples including Koreans, Chinese, Mongols, and Muslims.

The history of a borderland is invariably one in which identities converge, coexist, and sometimes conflict. Such identities, which are invariably in flux, cannot be appropriated by a single nation-state. In this sense, the question of who owns the historical legacy of Koguryo is beside the point. It is instead worth trying to understand how Korean nationals and Chinese nationals today make sense of the people and cultures that blended to shape Koguryo in ancient times. The history of the border region between North Korea and China needs to be examined as that of an intercultural site of hybridity, both within and beyond the boundaries of the modern nation-state, rather than as the exclusive national history of one nation.

In prioritising differences as opposed to interaction and creolisation is hardly unique to China and the two Koreas. Each nation in East Asia has armed itself with a narrative stressing the uniqueness and achievements of its national history. However, unilateral claims lead to confrontation instead of co-operation, and a negation of “history in between”. Rather than pursuing one-nation centred nationalist approaches to history, highlighting the interactive nature of history in East Asia could

contribute to a dialogue in history and archaeology that would overcome inter-national antagonisms and pave the way toward a more harmonious and interactive East Asia.

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Notes

[1] It can also be written "Goguryeo" in Korean.

[2] For example Sun Jinji, "Guanyu gaogouli guishu wenti de jige zhengyi jiaodian" (On Some Contested Issues Concerning the Problem of Gaogouli's Affiliation), *Dongbei minzushi yanjiu* (Study on the History of Northeast Nationalities), Vol.1, Zhengzhou: *Zhengzhou guji chubanshe* (Zhengzhou classics publishing house).

[3] *Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe lishixi* (History Department of People's Education Press), *Zhongguo lishi* (Chinese History) II, Beijing: *Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe* (People's Education Press), 2004, p.16. The most important tribes of Mohe were the Sumo, Boduo, Anchegu, Funie, Haoshi, Heishui, and Baishan.

[4] *Chugan Chosun* (Weekly Chosun) No. 1722, September 26, 2003.

[5] "Gaogouli role in Chinese history traced", [China Daily](#), June 24, 2003;

[6] *Kuksa p'yonch'an wiwonhoe* (National Institute of Korean History), *Kodung hakgyo kuksa* (National History for High School), Seoul: *Kyoyuk injok chawonbu* (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development), 2002, pp. 53 - 54.

- [7] Quoted in “China, Korea Dispute Ancient Kingdom” [China, Korea Dispute Ancient Kingdom](#); (accessed 12 December, 2005).
- [8] Approximately 200,000-300,000 North Korean refugees currently reside illegally in northeastern China. “China shock for South Korea, [Asia Times Online](#), September 11, 2004; (accessed December 12, 2005).
- [9] The toponym Manchuria is associated with Russian and especially Japanese designs on the Asian mainland, represented most notoriously by the 1932 establishment of the Japanese puppet state of “Manchukuo”. “Northeast China or simply “the Northeast” are therefore the preferred terms, and among Chinese scholars are the only acceptable references (Hosoya 1990: 105, cited in Elliot 2000: 607).
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- [17] Tan’gun is the mythical progenitor of the Korean people.
- [18] [Korea Herald](#), January 7, 2004; [Chosun ilbo](#), January 9, 2004.
- [19] [Korea Herald](#), January 8, 2004.
- [20] [Joongang Daily](#), January 12, 2004.
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[34] *Joongang Daily*, January 12, 2004.

[35] “ Lost Kingdom, Modern Spat”, [Joongang Daily](#), January 12, 2004; (accessed May 7, 2004).