History of Koguryŏ and China’s Northeast Asian Project

Park Kyeong-chul *

Introduction

The Koguryŏ Dynasty, established during the 3rd century B.C. around the Maek tribe is believed to have begun its function as a centralized entity in the Northeast Asia region. During the period between 1st century B.C. and 1st century A.D. aggressive regional expansion policy from the Koguryŏ made it possible to overcome its territorial limitations and weak economic basis. By the end of the 4th century A.D., Koguryŏ emerged as an empire that had acquired its own independent lebensraum in Northeast Asia.

This research paper will delve into identifying actual founders of the Koguryŏ Dynasty and shed light on their lives prior to the actual establishment of the Dynasty. Then on, I will analyze the establishment process of Koguryŏ Dynasty. Thereafter, I will analyze the history of Koguryŏ Dynasty at three different stages: the despotic military state period, the period in which Koguryŏ emerged as an independent empire in Northeast Asia, and the era of war against the Sui and Tang dynasty. Upon completion of the above task, I will illustrate the importance of Koguryŏ history for Koreans. Finally, I attempt to unearth the real objectives why the Chinese academics are actively promoting the Northeast Asian Project.

* Professor, Dept. of Liberal Arts, Kangnam University
The Yemaek tribe and their culture

The main centers of East Asian culture in approximately 2000 B.C. were China - by this point it had already become an agrarian society - and the Mongol-Siberian region where nomadic cultures reign. These cultures in turn spread out to Manchuria, Korea, and Japan - nations whose own histories can be traced back to these tribes. The Korean nation has its roots in the Yemaek bronze culture that developed under the influence of the nomadic bronze culture, which flourished within the Mongol-Siberian region.

Efforts to uncover the roots and formation of the Korean nation should be focused on proving the actual existence of independent ‘Ye’ and ‘Maek’ tribes, offshoots of the Altaic peoples of Central Asia. Such a study would serve to shed light on identifying the peoples of Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ, and Koguryŏ in terms of their cultural origins. Moreover, such studies would make possible the introduction of a spatial and temporal hypothesis regarding this Yemaek cultural zone. The term, ‘Yemaek cultural zone’, refers to a geographical area in Manchuria and in the Korean peninsula where such a homogenous culture was proactive.

This Yemaek cultural zone is believed to have established anywhere between the 12th to 10th century B.C., and to have been kept active by their descendants who continued to live on the Korean Peninsula and in Manchuria as part of the homogenous Yemaek culture. From the 7th to 8th century B.C. and on, these tribes began to increase heterogeneously in nature as a result of unbalanced development -due to differing geographical and environmental circumstances- and adopting different survival strategies each tribe had experienced.

These Yemaek tribes would go on to establish three statelets in the areas of Manchuria and Korean peninsula, namely Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ, and Koguryŏ. Thus, it goes without saying that an in-depth examination of this Yemaek cultural zone should precede while attempting to uncover the process through which these three states were formed.
During the Bronze Age, the center of Yemaek culture was situated in the Liao River basin located in Liaodong, which situated between the Taizi and Hun rivers. Moreover, the Liaodong Bronze Dagger Culture (C on Map 1.) can be regarded as the cultural root of Old Chosŏn. What’s more, the dynamics created during the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age became the driving force that eventually led to the formation of Old Chosŏn.

The cultural origins of Puyŏ can be found in the Xituanshan culture (E on Map 1.) formed around the Sungari River basin, the Gaoli statelet, which is thought to have had intricate relations with Puyŏ, is believed to have originated from the Hanshu and Wanghaitun culture (G on Map.1). For its part, Koguryŏ’s culture is believed to have stemmed from Konggwi-ri culture (D on Map 1.). Moreover, Xiaoyingzhi and Tuanjie culture (F on Map 1.) are believed to be the cultural basis from which Okchŏ emanated. However, Yinggeling and Dongkang culture (H on Map...
1.), which have been regarded as the cultural predecessors of Sushen and Yilou, lie outside of the Yemaek cultural zone.

Meanwhile, according to the scholars who believe that the capital of Old Chosŏn was at some point relocated, the top-shaped pottery culture (J on Map 1.), which existed before the onset of the latter period of Old Chosŏn, should be included in the Yemaek cultural zone. In addition, the undecorated pottery culture emerged in the central and southern sections of the Korean peninsula are believed to have had its origins in Songgukli (I on Map 1.) culture. It is also thought that wet rice cultivation began in this area, and that these cultures were the basis upon which the Samhan culture was built.

However, there has been general agreement among scholars that Liaoshi Bronze Dagger Culture (B on Map 1.) ceased to be a part of the Yemaek cultural zone from the Iron Age onwards. This development should be understood as having occurred not because of the reduced power of the Yemaek tribes, but rather because their much more solidified national identity by this point.

The Bronze Age in Manchuria and the Korean peninsula was the period in which the Korean nation, then referred to as the Yemaek, began to form its identity and put down roots. Here it should be duly noted that during this period, the Yemaek lay well outside of the Chinese Bronze cultural zone. These Yemaek tribes, whose culture was influenced by the Mongol-Siberian nomadic cultures, created an initial or first period of Yemaek culture, which we can more commonly refer to as ‘Lute-shaped Bronze Dagger Culture.’ This means that the origins of the Yemaek, the forefathers of the Korean nation, were distinct from those of the Chinese.

The second period of Yemaek culture, or ‘Narrow Bronze Dagger Culture’, was one in which the Yemaek preserved their cultural identity despite the struggles which emerged with Chinese culture, which was then very potent in terms of its ability to penetrate and assimilate other cultures, during the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age. Rather, the Yemaek were able to use the Chinese culture to strengthen their own culture.
During this transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, although still homogenous and increasingly distinct from the Han culture, the Yemaek tribes began to splinter off into smaller units or statelets, all of which exhibited different types of societies. As such, the political development, which occurred during the transition period, may very well indicate that the Yemaek cultural zone, which emerged during the Bronze Age, was the foundation from which Old Chosŏn (which emerged during the 3-4 century B.C.) and then Puyŏ, Koguryŏ, Okchŏ-Tongye, and Samhan were spawned (please see Figure 1.).

The Formation of Koguryo State

In or around 1000 B.C, as iron culture began to spread in Northeast China, the usage of pit tombs, which was the main tomb style employed by the Yemaek tribes, became increasingly common in the eastern part of Liaoning and in Jilin. However, from the 3rd century onwards, some of the
Maek tribes that had settled in the central region of the Yalu River basin began to use a unique type of tomb known as stone-mound tombs. The presence of such tombs, which are clearly distinct from the pit tombs found in the Northeast area of China and Northwest of the Korean peninsula, indicates the political and cultural strength of the people who settled in this area, and who would later emerge as the main actors in the formation of the Koguryŏ kingdom.4

Korean contemporary academics refers to the Maek tribe(s) who built these stone-mound tombs in the central region of the Yalu River basin, and the Hon and Tokro rivers from the 3rd century onwards, that is, before Koguryŏ actually became a state, as either the original Koguryŏ society, Gaoli tribe society, or Koguryŏ society. These scholars have attempted to not only prove the existence of these people, but also to shed light on their life style and the characteristics of their society (hereafter, the people from this period will, for convenience’s sake, be referred to as Koguryŏ society).

From an archaeological standpoint, the developmental stages of Koguryŏ society/state can be identified as follows: Konggwi-ri culture-> Nonam-ri culture-> Koguryŏ culture. During this period 12 to 18 regional groups, which existed at the chiefdom level, competed for supremacy within a structure of competition-cooperation in this area.

However, as a result of the following factors a growing sense of insecurity began to take hold amongst these regional groups: the attempts to conquer the area made by the Han and Puyŏ; the emergence and growing encroachment within the area by the Malgal (Mo-ho) and Xianbei tribes; as well as the internal conflicts that broke out among these regional groups. To overcome this situation, the peoples of this area were forced to accelerate their political integration, in other words, form a state. The political structure that a group adopts, that is, the process through which this group becomes a state, which is a complicated form of polity, is a major determinant of the lifestyles that members of that society can aspire to.

The state of Koguryŏ was a complex political entity that emerged
during the process that saw the strongest chiefdom conquer and merge with the weaker groupings. The dynamics, which were created during this process of swallowing up other chiefdoms, became the driving force that eventually led to the formation of the state of Koguryŏ.

According to King Kwanggaeto’s epitaph, the process of the formation of the state of Koguryŏ began during the 3rd century B.C., with actual statehood achieved in the aftermath of the reigns of kings Chumo, Yuri, and Taemusin, who ruled between the later half of the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D.

The core group at the forefront of the formation of Koguryŏ was mounted nomads led by Chumo (or Chumong as he is also known) who had escaped from Puyŏ, which had been established in the Sungari River basin, during the internal power struggle that broke out at the end of the first century B.C. The advanced political, economic, and military skills that this group had acquired from Puyŏ allowed it to establish itself as the dominant power in this region in a short period of time. The initial area that fell under their control is believed to have been modern-day Huanren County in Liaoning province, which is situated in the central region of the Hon River basin (which is in itself a tributary of the Yalu River).

The fact that the life of Chumo has been by and large depicted as that of a hero is a clear indication of the desire for stability that existed within the region at the time the state was formed. As such, the practice in which future generations of Koguryŏ citizens worshipped him as a god and labeled him Chŏnjejiya or Ilwŏljiya (the son of the heavens), can be understood to originate from this reality as well. King Yuri, who was the son of Chumo, established the capital of the new state in Jian-in modern-day Jilin province- along the Yalu River basin and attempted to implement the practice of ancestor worship as the ruling ideology of the new state.

The state-formation process of Koguryŏ involved the institutionalization and personalization of the political apparatus and power structure through the use of war and the practice of ancestor worship. Moreover, it was during this process that the characteristics of the state of early Koguryŏ and of its political regime were established.
During this formation period, Koguryŏ was focused on expanding and concentrating its military power. It was through this pursuit that Koguryŏ was able to acquire its ‘stateness’, which was characterized by three developments: the consolidation of its territory, the forging of an identity separate from that of other groups, and the achievement of autonomy. Koguryŏ, in accordance with the meritocracy that emerged as a result of the despotic military state, which was originally formed, was a highly stratified society throughout its existence. These characteristics that emerged during the formation period may very well have defined the internal attributes that would define Koguryŏ throughout its history.

Expansion of Koguryŏ’s Power

Koguryŏ as a despotic military state

The siege mentality, which the ruling class of Koguryŏ possessed, was reflected in their attempts to bring about a highly structured social order and in the state’s constant quest for the expansion of its military power. Koguryŏ had become a military or garrison state and constantly sought to expand its territory through military conquest. Furthermore, the state used external threats emanating from the surrounding powers as a means of achieving its own internal integration. As such, the eventual shape of the state of Koguryŏ was defined by war, which is the result of military actions, rather than internal demands.

The survival and development strategy adopted by Koguryŏ during the state formation period was one in which: the constant increase of military power was sought; military-based territorial expansion was promoted; vassal states consisting of those tribes which had been conquered were formed; and a forced migration policy was adopted; with the end result of these policies being Koguryŏ’s increasing march towards becoming a despotic military state.

The strategic objectives behind Koguryŏ’s expansion policy were the
securing of the two most important strategic items during this period: horses and iron. Koguryo’s rapid conquest of Northern Okchō, which was located in the Tumen River basin, their attempts to secure iron supplies in the Liaodong area, as well as their attempts to invade Puyō, Didouyu in Eastern Mongolia and the Khitan, all of which were known for their fine horses, is evidence of the validity of the above assertion regarding Koguryo’s strategic objectives. The acquisition of such horses and iron allowed Koguryo to implement an effective military strategy that was based on the use of potent cavalry forces.

Another source of Koguryo’s power was its ample fortresses erected in areas that were deemed to be of strategic importance (refer to Map 2). These stone fortresses took on a tactical role as Koguryo’s logistics and military operational centers. Moreover, these fortresses also played the central role in the defense in-depth strategy that Koguryo adopted during its 70-year war with the Sui and Tang dynasties. The recognition by Chinese forces that the Koguryo were a people ‘who lived in highly fortified areas nestled deep in mountainous terrain that are for all intents and purpose impenetrable’, is clear evidence of the strategic and tactical importance of these fortresses to the people of Koguryo.

Thus, from the above, we can ascertain that Koguryo’s constant war footing was the key variable in the formation of the state’s political, economic, social, and cultural structures, as well as in the development of its agriculture and trade.

Koguryo as an Empire in Northeast Asia

From early stages of the state onwards, Koguryo implemented a military-backed expansion policy in order to overcome its own environmental weaknesses. As a result, at the end of the 4th century A.D. Koguryo was able to move beyond the status of a simple kingdom and become a true multi-ethnic empire in Northeast Asia.
<Map 2> The Koguryŏ Theater during the 5-7th Centuries

five 'theater' (five areas as Koguryo's base of operations, strategic military strongholds)
A: the Yalu River theater
B: the Tumen River theater
C: the Taedong River theater
D: the Liao River theater
E: the Sungari River theater

Middle of bc
A.D 479
A.D 494
B.C 38
B.C 37
A.D 395
End of 4C
B.C 28

the defensive area
the Liaoshi operational zone
the Didouyu barrier
During the period spanning from the end of the 4th century to towards the end of the 6th century Koguryŏ established strongholds in the following areas: the Yalu River basin, Tumen River basin, Taedong River basin, Liao River basin, and the Sungari River basin. Another area of strategic importance that was seized by Koguryŏ during this period was the Liaoshi region. From the reign of Kwanggaet’o onwards, Koguryŏ focused on expanding its power into Eastern Mongolia; and followed this up during the middle of the 6th century with attempts to expand into the Nen River basin as well (see Map 2.). As a result of these efforts, Koguryŏ became the most powerful armed force in Northeast Asia from the 5th century onwards.

The following five areas, which it took almost five hundred years for Koguryŏ to subdue, emerged as the mobilization bases that supported Koguryŏ’s military lines, and also played a predominant role in the expansion of Koguryŏ’s military power: the Kuknaesŏng area situated between the Hon and Yalu river basins; the Chaeksŏng area located in the lower regions of the Tumen River; the Pyŏngyangsŏng area situated in the Taedong River basin; Liadong Fortress located in the Liao River basin; and Jilin province situated in the Sungari River basin. These five areas not only functioned as strategic strongholds from which Koguryŏ could implement its military plans, but also became the central factor in the historical development of Koguryŏ.

As such, if we perceive these five areas as Koguryŏ’s base of operations, that is, their strategic military strongholds, then we can formulate the notion of ‘theater’ as the line of operations which connects these strongholds to individual battlefields in these areas. This theater represents the hypothetical spaces in which the base of operations, the line of operation and individual battlefields are brought together.

These five theaters and their respective functional and strategic networks, as well as the defensive areas established, such as the Liaoshi operational zone and the Didouyu barrier, can be understood as the basic framework through which Koguryŏ’s military strategies were developed and implemented. These theaters can be found in Map 2.
From the 5th century onwards, the international order in Northeast Asia was led by five major powers: Koguryŏ; Northern Wei, which emerged as the strongest of the North dynasties; the South dynasties; Rouran (Jujiang state); and the Tuguhun. The balance of power international system established in Northeast Asia allowed each of these five states to enjoy a period of relative stability.\(^8\)

This system saw a loose alliance between the South dynasties, Rouran, and the Tuguhun be formed as a counter to growing Northern Wei ambitions in the area; a situation which in turn facilitated Koguryŏ’s military expansion at the expense of these three states as the Northern Wei had no choice but to allow Koguryŏ some leeway. This situation allowed Koguryŏ to acquire the casting vote in deciding the dynamics between these five powers, and in maintaining the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

As such, from the 5th century onwards, the Northern Wei had no choice but to adopt a policy of allowing Koguryŏ to emerge as the hegemonic power within the region, while securing its position within this order and preparing for its own challenge for hegemony somewhere down the road.

The dominance of Koguryŏ within this system allowed its people to distinguish their nomadic culture from that of the Chinese, and to take great pride in its standing as one of the predominant forces of the day.\(^9\) Moreover, Koguryŏ implemented its own world policy based on their perception of the world, a policy designed to establish itself as the supreme power in Northeast Asia. Thus, Koguryŏ, which had by then become an empire, was able to emerge as the hegemonic power in Northeast Asia, and as one which had established its own independent lebensraum.

Koguryŏ was able to establish this independent lebensraum by further solidifying its grip over ethnic tribes such as the Malgal (Mo-ho), Xianbei, Khitan, Didouyu and the Shiwei. Moreover, as a result of this subjugation process, Koguryŏ emerged as a unified multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. This multi-ethnic composition was in fact another factor that contributed to the growth of Koguryŏ’s national power. The reality of
Koguryŏ during this period lies in serious contrast with the fate of the Han Chinese at that time. During this period of Koguryŏ ascendancy, the Han were repeatedly oppressed, terrorized, and even conquered by the nomadic tribes of the Northeast Asian steppe. Koguryŏ was able to further increase its military might and national power by setting up a tributary system in which it guaranteed the survival of the nomadic tribes that it had subjugated in exchange for their labor and resources.

There has been a tendency among certain segments of Korean academia to focus exclusively on the nomadic nature of Koguryŏ. However, given the highly unfavorable natural environment of the territory in which Koguryŏ operated, characterized by a high degree of mountainous areas that rendered agricultural production all but impossible, and a severe lack of pastoral lands which greatly complicated any efforts to raise cattle, it is necessary to reconsider the argument put forward by these scholars that Koguryŏ = nomadic society-state.

Koguryŏ’s 70-year war with the Sui and Tang Dynasties (598-668-677 A.D.)

Basing their arguments on imperial edicts sent from the Sui and Tang dynasties to Koguryŏ, many Chinese scholars have simply defined the latter wars with Sui and Tang as internal ones without even trying to study the nuances hidden in the clichés and rhetoric contained in such documents. These studies clearly illustrate the politically motivated notion of history possessed by certain Chinese academics. However the Sino-centric worldview which Sui and Tang possessed at that time, as revealed in the edicts and related historical data, was based on the Chinese perception of Koguryŏ, Paekje and Shilla as equal ‘barbarians.’ As such, singling out Koguryŏ as the subject of these Chinese dynasties’ internal policies, and the wars with Koguryŏ as internal conflicts represents nothing more than absurd examples of deductive logic.

The same historical data shows that the tributary system, which was the main mechanism employed within the Sino-centric sphere, between
Koguryŏ and Sui and Tang continued to be in place even during the period in which these powers were at war with one another! The presence of assertions such as this in the historical data clearly reveals the fabricated nature of the Sino-centric worldview and of these tributary relations as it pertains to the relationship Koguryŏ had with these Chinese states.

In other words, Sui and Tang perceived Koguryŏ as a barbarian power lying outside of their respective spheres. Even if such a tributary system did exist between these Chinese states and Koguryŏ, it did not function along the same lines as the usual Sino-centric system. The tributary system was based on the notion of Chinese cultural and ideological superiority; however, this ‘superiority’ was only in effect during the periods in which China was able to militarily conquer the ‘four barbarian states’. This hierarchical international relations system, with China positioned at the top, was in reality based on Confucianism rather than the actual military superiority of China. As such, Chinese attempts to prove otherwise were designed to solidify the emperor’s own sovereign power.11

In short, the road to war or peace between Koguryŏ, Sui and Tang did not stem from such static and routine doctrines as suzerain-vassal or tributary relationships. When we analyze the international relations of the East Asian states during this period from the more dynamic geopolitical and historical perspectives, it becomes evident that Koguryŏ’s wars with Sui and Tang were international conflicts that were motivated by the pursuit of national interests or “realist” principles such as national survival, preservation and development. What, then, were these national interests these states were trying to acquire or defend?

Koguryŏ’s interest and encroachment in Eastern Mongolia became widespread following its conquest of the Khitan at the beginning of the 5th century. Eastern Mongolia was widely regarded by all as a “geo-strategic heartland” from which control over Mongolia could be exerted, and a stable and long-lasting hegemony over Manchuria as well as the “Western barbarians” could be acquired. As such, Koguryŏ, clearly aware of the
geographical importance of Eastern Mongolia, focused its energies on expanding its power in this area.

The ruling class of Sui and Tang consisting of Wuchuanzhen warlords, which was one of the Six Commanders established by the Northern Wei to control Inner Mongolia, became from the end of the 6th century onwards greatly concerned with Koguryo's policy of establishing its hegemony over the Khitan in and around Eastern Mongolia. As such, the intense rivalry which emerged between Koguryo, Sui and Tang and the Tu-chueh for the control of the Khitan tribes in the Eastern Mongolian region became one of the major reasons for the outbreak of the 70-year war between Koguryo and Sui and Tang.

Koguryo tried to carry out a “continental policy” that was designed to guarantee its independent survival as well as the maintenance and expansion of its hegemony over Northeast Asia. Koguryo’s approach toward the Eastern Mongolia issue was based on the same kind of military expansionist policies that it had adhered to since its formation.

For their part, Sui and Tang tried to bring about a world policy that would ultimately guarantee their security by subduing all of East Asia under a unitary Sino-centric order. Thus, Koguryo’s 70-year war with Sui and Tang was a series of international wars in East Asia in which each side pursued their own national interests, as well as a clash between Koguryo’s continental policy and Sui and Tang’s quest for the implementation of a Sino-centric world policy.

The 70-year war, which started in 598 A.D. with Koguryo’s first attack, actually lasted for 79 years and eventually led to the destruction of Paekje and Koguryo, in 660 and 668 A.D. respectively, before Shilla and Tang ended it in 677 A.D. It was the longest international war in Northeast Asia up to that point in history.

In addition, another characteristic of international wars is also evident in this 70-year conflict, that is, the absence of any eternal allies or enemies. What we find instead is the presence of arrangements based on the best interests of the individual nations involved that are in accordance with the following maxims: ‘the friend of my enemy is my enemy and the
enemy of my enemy is my friend’ and ‘even a deal with the devil is possible in the name of national interest.’ As such, each of these countries involved in the 70-year war was above all out to protect its own security and advance its national interests.

The Identity of the Yemaek, Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ and Koguryŏ

A closer look at Map 2 and Map 1 reveals the overlap that exists between the two. As such Konggwi-ri culture (D on Map 1.) overlaps with Koguryŏ’s Yalu River theater (A on Map 2.); Liaodong bronze dagger culture (C on Map 1.) overlaps with the Liao River theater (D on Map 2.); Xituanshan culture (E on Map 1.) overlaps with the Sungari River theater (E on Map 2.); the Xiaoyingzhi and Tuanjie cultures (F on Map 1.) share common characteristics with the Tumen River theater (B on Map 2.); and the spinning-top shaped pottery culture (J on Map 1.) overlaps with the Taedong River theater (C on Map 2.). Moreover, the Liaoshi operational zone (Map 2.) overlaps with the Liaoshi bronze dagger culture (B on Map 1.) and the Didouyu barrier (Map 2.), which Koguryŏ intended to use as a glacis, overlaps with the Upper Xiajiadian culture (A on Map 1.) that emerged in Inner Mongolia and that maintained a relationship with the Yemaek cultural zone on its borders. Furthermore, the Shiwei area (Map 2.) situated in the Nen River basin, which Koguryŏ attempted to conquer because of the high degree of iron found there, overlaps with the Hanshu and Wanghaitun cultures (G on Map 1.) from which the Gaoli statelet emerged.

Here the writer is not asserting that Koguryŏ’s expansionist policies that eventually led to their achieving of a hegemonic status in the region were intended to restore the Yemaek cultural zone. Rather, the writer’s intention is to show that these expansionist policies were driven by the need to assure the necessary human and material resources, including horses and iron, which Koguryŏ required to assure its safety and security. During this process of acquiring the necessary materials for its survival Koguryŏ conquered the Tumen, Taedong, Liao, and Sungari River basins-
the majority of whose people were in all likelihood members of Yemaek tribes- and consequently integrated them within Koguryō society. In turn, this gradual integration process provided the basis for the formation of the Koguryō state.

The success of Koguryō’s expansionist policies and the smooth integration of its conquered populace appears to have been greatly simplified by the cultural traits which these subjugated peoples shared with the people of Koguryō itself. On the other hand, Koguryō adopted a markedly different approach towards tribes with which it did not share cultural similarities, such as the Malgal (Mo-ho). As such, even in cases where the Malgal joined forces with Koguryō on the battlefield, their exploits were separately recorded. This discriminatory treatment of minorities within the Koguryō military almost certainly reflected the mentality of Koguryō’s leadership at that time. In other words, minority tribes such as the Malgal never gained acceptance as citizens of the state, or as members of Koguryō society.

In general, self-identification is based on a process of identifying similarities and differences between oneself and others. As such, Koguryō began by conquering areas that shared cultural similarities, turning them into strategic strongholds, and then proceeded to integrate and assimilate the conquered populace into the Koguryō state. These policies directly influenced the formation and operation of Koguryō’s theater. However, Koguryō adopted discriminatory policies towards tribes that were ethnically and culturally different.

As such, Koguryō’s self-identity was based on two different perceptions; one being the existence of a shared cultural heritage with other Yemaek tribes, for instance other states such as Old Chosŏn and Puyŏ, and the other the perception of cultural and political differences with non-Yemaek tribes such as the Han Chinese.

The importance of Koguryō in Korean history is clearly visible in Figure 2. Every state ever founded in Manchuria and on the Korean peninsula has its origins in the Yemaek tribes that first emerged during the Bronze Age. What’s more, the overlapping nature of maps 1 and 3 is
clear evidence that the history and culture of Old Chosŏn and Puyŏ, which were spawned from the culture of the Yemaek tribes, were incorporated into Koguryŏ’s own culture. The Paekje dynasty, which existed at the same time as Koguryŏ, also shared the same origins. For its part, the development of Shilla was in large part made possible by the fact that it was put under the protection of Koguryŏ. Moreover, while Parhae was the direct successor of Koguryŏ, the founders of the Koryŏ dynasty also made similar claims to be the descendants of Koguryŏ.

Thus, Koguryŏ can be seen as the core entity that spatially links the states founded by Yemaek tribes in Manchuria, i.e. Old Chosŏn-Puyŏ-Parhae, with modern Korea. Moreover, Koguryŏ also serves as the temporal link through which the continuity of the Korean nation, from Chosŏn-Puyŏ-Parhae-Koryŏ to modern Korea, can be perceived. These
facts provide the background needed to understand why Chinese academics have pursued the Northeast Asian Project focused on the history of Koguryŏ.

**The True Nature of the Northeast Asian Project**

**Definition of the Northeast Asian Project: 2002~2006**

The Northeast Asian Project is a large-scale academic project designed to study the history and present state of China’s border areas. This research project launched at the national level has been designed to prove that the Northeast area, including areas in which Koguryŏ, Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ, Parhae and even modern Korea were or are situated, were historically and culturally a part of China.

**The Main Actors in this Northeast Asian Project**

The core research unit taking part in this project is the Center for China’s Borderland History and Geography Studies that is operated under the auspices of the government-backed Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This project has also received the support of the three Chinese provinces in the Northeast, namely Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilung Kiang. As such, this project involves the participation of all the institutes and scholars specializing in China’s borderlands. However, the true nature of this project, which can be boiled down to an attempt to distort history in which all of the nation’s academic resources were poured into, was amply evident even before the project was officially launched in 2002.

**Background and objectives of the Northeast Asian Project**

*Background to the Related Policy Measures:*

This Northeast Asian Project is designed to subjugate the growing nationalist tendencies that have emerged among China’s ethnic minorities in the aftermath of the adoption of a socialist market economy to the wider concept of Chinese nationalism.
Actual Objectives

The Chinese government considers its hold on the three Northeastern provinces to have become very tenuous from a political, economic, as well as historical standpoint in the aftermath of the momentous changes that have taken place in Northeast Asia. The Chinese government has recently begun to draw up plans to implement the North-Northeast Region Area Development Project, which is scheduled to include the securing of large-scale investments for these three provinces that have been largely left out of the remarkable growth that the rest of China has achieved since the 1970’s. In addition to these large-scale development plans, the Chinese also intend to restore their traditional hegemony over the area.

Anticipated Results of this Project

The Northeast Asian Project is also designed to prevent the emergence of political nationalism amongst ethnic Koreans, which are widely perceived as having the strongest self-identity of all the 55 ethnic minorities found in China, and to remove the historical ties to the Manchurian area possessed by North and South Koreans alike. The military aspect of China’s response to this problem is clearly discernible in its recent deployment of military forces to the border between Manchuria and North Korea, and in its plans to build a railroad that runs along this same border.

The True Nature of the Northeast Asian Project

If the Northeast Asian Project is successful in its attempts to incorporate the history of Koguryŏ into China’s, then Korea would lose its claims over the histories of Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ, Koguryŏ, and Parhae. From a temporal standpoint, should this come to pass, the history of Korea would be reduced from 5000 to 2000 years, while from a spatial perspective its history would be reduced to the events that took place south of the Han River (please refer to Figure 2.).
The assertions made by Chinese academics as part of this Northeast Asian Project and Korean responses

● Trends in the study of the ancient tribes residing in Northeast Asia and Old Chosŏn,

<Chinese Assertions> China has included Old Chosŏn as a part of Chinese history. These academics have argued that the Tangun foundation myth was influenced by Chinese culture, and that Kija and Weiman Chosŏn were local powers under the control of China.

< Korea’s response> The existence of Kija Chosŏn has never been proven; moreover, archaeological studies have uncovered proof that a bronze culture unlike the Chinese one existed in Manchuria (Cho Beop-jong)

● The ancestors of Koguryŏ and its foundation

<Chinese Assertions> Chinese academics regard the descendants of the legendary Chinese figure Zhuanxu (Gao Yang) as the founders of Koguryŏ. Moreover, these scholars maintain that Koguryŏ culture has its origins in the Hongshan culture that emerged in the area between the Liaohe-Daling River basins.

< Korea’s response> A period of 3000 years elapsed between the emergence of Hongshan culture and Koguryŏ’s stone-mound tomb culture. Moreover, the people who founded Koguryŏ were not a group which migrated from China, but rather members of Yemaek tribes who had been engaged in agrarian life in Manchuria and on the Korean peninsula. (Yeo Ho-kyu).

● Tributary relations between Koguryŏ and China

<Chinese Assertions> Chinese academics have emphasized the fact that Koguryŏ kings sent tributes to Chinese emperors, in exchange for which they received investiture from the emperor. According to these scholars, this proves that Koguryŏ was a vassal of China.
"Korea’s response" This tributary system was only one of the formal diplomatic mechanisms which had been put into place between Koguryŏ and China. Thus, if we follow the Chinese logic, then the history of Paekjae, Silla, and Japan should also be considered to be a part of China’s history (Lim Ki-hwan).

● Koguryŏ’s territory and the relocation of its capital to Pyongyang

"Chinese Assertions" The Chinese interpretation of the history of Koguryŏ has so far been riddled with inconsistencies in that it has been unable to account for the fact that this history has unfolded in China and North Korea. To remedy this, the Chinese have adopted the position that as Koguryŏ was a provincial regime operating in Chinese controlled lands, it should continue to be considered as such even when it relocated its capital to the Pyŏngyang area; thus implying that the history of Koguryŏ after the relocation should also be considered to be a part of China’s own history as well.

"Korea’s response" If this theory is in fact true, then Chinese scholars’ long-held perception of China as a unitary multinational state must be discarded at once. As such, Chinese scholars’ arbitrary interpretations of the past must be perceived as nothing more than politically motivated endeavors (Kong Seok-gu).

● Koguryŏ’s 70-year war with Sui and Tang

"Chinese Assertions" Chinese scholars have tended to argue that these wars were internal conflicts rather than international ones. Both the Sui and Tang perceived Koguryŏ as falling within their territory, and attempted to restore their control over this peripheral area by unifying it with the center. However, Chinese scholars have argued that Silla and Paekje’s relations with the Chinese dynasties were based on a simple vassal-suzerain relationship.

"Korea’s response" Korean scholars perceive this war with Sui and Tang as international wars in which all parties sought to maximize their national interests and as a clash between the world policy of Sui and Tang
and Koguryŏ’s continental policy. Thus, during the process of its military-based territorial expansion Koguryŏ developed its own continental policy (Park Kyung-chul).

● The process of dispersion of the Koguryŏ population following the downfall of Koguryŏ

<Chinese Assertions> Chinese scholars have argued that the great majority of the Koguryŏ population migrated to China proper and were absorbed by the Han Chinese following the downfall of Koguryŏ; and that as such, the history of Koguryŏ should be considered to be a part of that of China’s.

<Korea’s response> Korean scholars maintain that while it is true that many people migrated to China following the downfall of Koguryŏ, there was also a significant amount of individuals who made their way to Silla and who were absorbed by that culture. In this regards, increased attention should be paid to the process through which individuals selected their eventual destination following the downfall of Koguryŏ (Kim Hyun-sook).

● Parhae as the successor to Koguryŏ

<Chinese Assertions> Basing their arguments on A New History of the Tang Dynasty, Chinese academics have contended that the great majority of the population of Parhae was of Malgal origin. Moreover, these scholars have argued that Parhae was a tributary state of China whose name was bestowed upon it by the Chinese. As such, Parhae should also be considered as a provincial regime that operated within Chinese controlled territory.

<Korea’s response> In the Old History of the Tang Dynasty references to the founder of Parhae Tae Choyŏng in which he is described as a Koguryŏ eccentric. Furthermore, the kings of Parhae referred to themselves as ‘emperors’ and had their own independent reign titles (yŏnho). Parhae also adopted customs and cultural practices, such as the heating systems which they employed, from Koguryŏ (Han Giu-cheol).
Koryŏ as the successor of Koguryŏ

<Chinese Assertions> The Chinese argue that there is no historical linkage between the Koguryŏ founded by Chumo, and Koryŏ which was founded by Wang Kon. Chinese scholars have maintained that as Koguryŏ is an integral part of Chinese history, the actual founders of Koryŏ can be traced back to the ancestors of those who founded the Chosŏn, dynasty.

<Korea’s response> There are ample historical references in which not only the people of Koryŏ, but also the Chinese of that day, identify Koryŏ as the descendants of Koguryŏ. The fact that the majority of the population of Parhae migrated to Koryŏ following the downfall of their state can be understood as having been based on a common perception of a shared historical lineage to Koguryŏ (Ahn Byoung-woo).

Conclusion: Looking Beyond the Northeast Asian Project

The attempts of Chinese to distort history are nothing new. During the 18th century, the Qing dynasty published a book entitled Qin Ding Man Zhou Yuan Liu Kao, which in turn was based on the Liaoshi. This book, which described the history of Korea from the standpoint of Manchuria, argued that Korea’s history was a part of Manchurian history. Although modern scholars view this book as being flawed in that it limited the history of the Qing dynasty to the events which unfolded in Manchuria, this book caused great consternation among the Sirhak scholars of the day, men such as An Chŏngbok, Chŏng Yakyong, and Han Ch’iyŏn who possessed their own Korean peninsula centered perception of history, who set out to prove the independent nature of Korean history and the historical distortions contained in the Qin Ding Man Zhou Yuan Liu Kao.

The Japanese perception of including the history of Chosŏn as a part of Manchurian history emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, based on a politically motivated historical conception to engage with Japan’s growing imperialism in East Asia. This argument, in which the history of
Manchuria was detached from that of China but incorporated with that of Korea’s, was based on the Japanese desire to deny China’s ability to make any historical claims to the region. Moreover, by denying the existence of Korea’s independent history, which they claimed had always been dependent on Manchuria; the Japanese were able to justify their own theory regarding the dependent nature of Korea. However, Korean nationalist scholars such as Shin Ch’aeho, Pak Eũnsik and Chŏng Inbo attempted to create a new perception of Korean history that was based on the positive attributes of traditional Korean culture. Moreover, they established a perception of ancient Korean history that was based on the independent nature of ancient Korean kingdoms such as Puyŏ and Koguryŏ.

Generally speaking, the development of historical perceptions represents an attempt by the protagonists to ascribe certain significance of the past. Any attempt to understand the history of Koguryŏ must begin with accepting the fact that Koguryŏ’s territory contemporaneously contained the northern part of the Korean peninsula and the three Northeast provinces of modern-day China.

In this regard, North and South Korean, as well as Chinese and Japanese scholars cannot and should not deny the validity of this assertion. A proper interpretation of history is not one in which actual history is distorted or hidden or be based on temporary truths.

Korea should respond to these non-scholarly but politically motivated historical interpretations via adopting comprehensive strategies through which the identity of ancient Korean history - those of the Old Chosŏn, Puyŏ, Koguryŏ, and Parhae - can be identified based upon actual historical and cultural flows.

 Notes:

1 Kim Jeong-bae, *The Origins of Korean Culture* (Hanguk Minjokmunhwaũi
2 Recently, some Korean scholars have asserted that Paozhiyan culture was more closely related to Puyŏ than Xituanshan culture. Oh Kang-won, “Early iron culture in China and Manchuria: The formation and development of Paozhiyan culture - as it pertains to the cultural origins of Puyŏ and related issues (Chungmanjiyŏk Ch’obi Ch’ŏlgimunhwah: pojayŏnsik munhwaŭi sŏngnipgwag chŏngaeyangsang- Munhwabaegyŏng mit Puyŏ munjewa kwanryŏnhayŏ)”, Korean Ancient Historical Society (Hanguk Sanggosa Hakhoe), Archeology during the Transition Period III: The dawn of history (Chŏnhwangiŭi Kogohak III: Yŏksasidaeŭi Yömyŏng), 24th Academic Conference of the Korean Ancient Historical Society, October 2000; Others have argued that Hanshu-Wanghaitun culture= the Gaoli culture. Song Ki-ho & Park Yang-jin, Papers Presented during the 6th Summer Seminar of the Society for Korean Ancient History: Puyŏ’s position in ancient East Asia (Che 6 Hoe Hanguk Kodaesahakhoe Hagye Seminar Palp’yomunjip: Kodae Tongasiasŏ Pon Puyŏ), July 2004.

3 Lim Ki-hwan, The Formation of the Koguryŏ Ruling Structure (Koguryŏ...
Chipgwŏnch'eje Sŏngrip Kwajŏngŭi Yŏngu), PhD Dissertation, Kyunghee University, February 1995; Park Kyeong-chul, The Formation of the Koguryŏ Kingdom (Koguryŏ Kukgahyŏnsŏngŭi Yŏngu), PhD Dissertation, Korea University, December 1996; Yeo Ho-kyu, The Political Structure of Koguryŏ during the 1-4th Centuries (1-4 Segi Koguryŏ Chŏngch'I Ch'eye Yŏngu), PhD Dissertation Seoul National University, August 1997; Roh Tae-don, The History of Koguryŏ (Koguryŏsa Yŏngu), Sakyejul, 1999.


7 For more on this notion of ‘theater’, please refer to Park Kyeong-chul, Ibid 1989, p35. This author has focused on the fact that these five strongholds were established along river basins. As such, for convenience’s sake he labels these strongholds as follows: Yalu River theater, Tumen River theater, Taedong River theater, Liao River theater, and Sungari River theater. By identifying the entire territory of Koguryŏ as one big battlefield, we can postulate the existence of an overarching Koguryŏ theater which consists of the combination of the functions of the above-mentioned five theaters.

8 James E. Dougherty & Robert L. Pfaltzgraff Jr. Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey, (New Yrok; Harper & Row,
9 Ron Tae-don, “Koguryŏ people’s worldview as evidenced by the epigraphs created during the 5th century (5 segi Kŭmsŏkmune Poinŭn Koguryŏinŭi Ch’ŏnhagwan)”, Hanguksa Ron, Vol.19, history department of Seoul National University, 1988, pp31-66.


11 Peter Yoon (Yoon Young-min), “Critique of the Sino-centric cultural theory based on the western perspective of the tributary system (Sŏgu Hakgye Chokongjedo Yironŭ Chungguk Chungsimjŏk Munhwaron Pipan)”, Asiatic Studies (Asea Yŏngu), Vol. 109, Asiatic Research Center (Asea Munje Yŏnguso), Korea University, 2002.


13 Society for Korean Ancient History, Report Submitted to the Ministry of Education on China’s Distortion of Koguryŏ History: Measures to respond to China’s attempts to incorporate Koguryŏ history as its own- With a special focus on recent academic theories (Chunggukûi Koguryŏsa Waegoke Taehan Kyoyukbu Kukjŏnggwaje Pokosŏ: Chunggukûi Koguryŏsa Kwisokmunje Taechŏ Pangan-Hakmunjŏk Ronni Chŏngaerŭl Chungsimûro), December 2003.