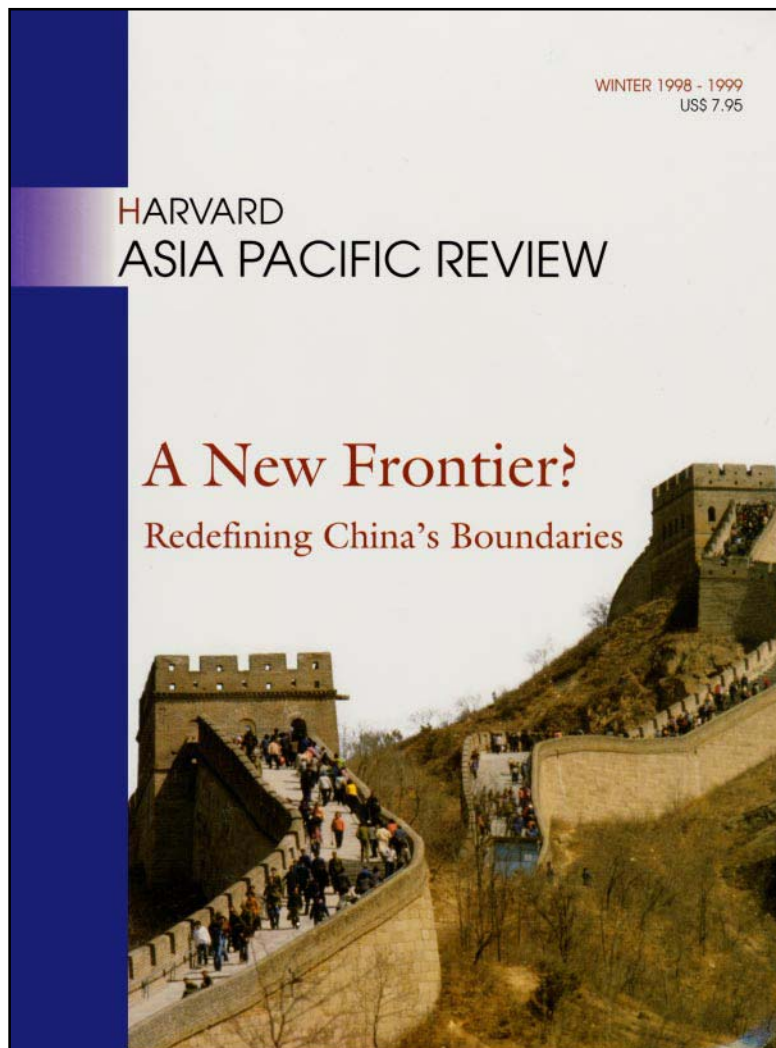


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# Open History, Open Nationalism

## The Battle Over Manchurian History SONG KI HO

I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO AUDIT SOME Archaeology courses as a Visiting Scholar for a year at the Harvard-Yenching Institute. The topic of discussion for the final day of one course was nationalism in archaeology. In class, we saw a BBC documentary entitled, "Ice Mummies—Ice Maidens."

One scene featured a debate between local and European scholars on whether a mummy found in the Altai region was Mongolian or European, and on where it should be kept. Springing from this debate, the professor explained how exclusionary nationalism can obstruct archaeological research in regions like Zimbabwe, Egypt, and China. I especially

sympathized with the professor's lecture on China because I had encountered similar experiences there.

### The Case of Parhae

Archaeology may seem far removed from ideology, since the mute artifacts it deals with are thousands of years old, but it is in fact affected by nationalism, since archaeology can change our understanding of history. The nation-states of East Asia have long exhibited a strong sense of nationalism. They often take insular and exclusionary attitudes toward historical claims over regions that overlap boundaries. The history of Parhae

(*Bohai* in Chinese) is one example.

Parhae (698-926) was a nation in modern-day Manchuria. As the 1300-year anniversary of the founding of Parhae approaches, interest in the nation has intensified, though little is actually known about it. A major reason for this gap in our knowledge is that few historical records were passed down to later generations, since another people had conquered Parhae. The brief historical records that do remain are from Parhae's neighboring nations—China's Tang dynasty, the Silla kingdom of Korea, and ancient Japan.

In addition, Parhae was a multi-racial society, and there is much debate about

how race interacted with politics in the ancient kingdom. Generally speaking, Parhae was composed of the Koguryô people from the Korean peninsula and the Malgal (*Mohe* in Chinese), who are now minorities in China, but it is unclear whether the founder of this country was from Koguryô or Malgal.

Parhae was located in today's central Manchuria, Northern Korea, and Russia's Yanhai province. Thus, in geographical terms, the history of Parhae concerns China, Russia, and Korea. For these reasons, research on Parhae has been carried out separately in these three nations. Japan also supports research because of its active con-

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tact with Parhae during ancient times and because of its more recent rule over Manchuria.

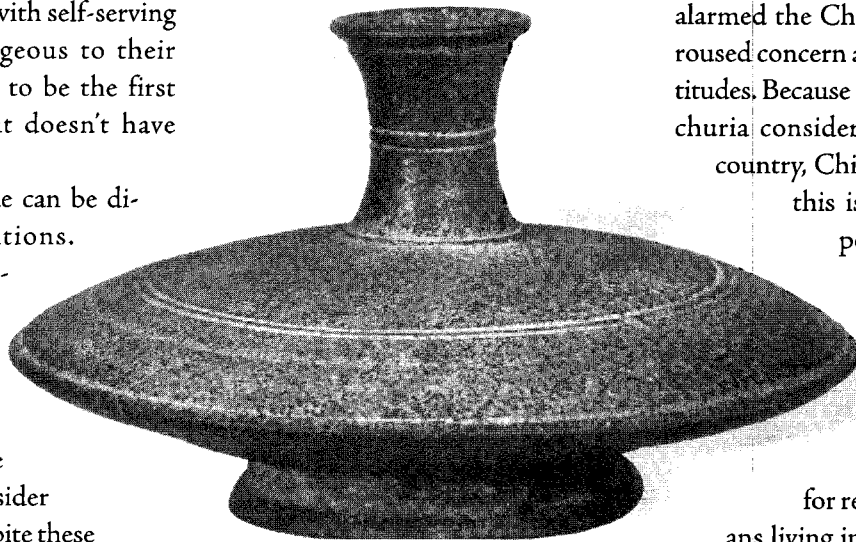
Parhae is thus of interest to each of these countries. Instead of studying the region's actual history, the scholars of each country emphasize nationalistic interpretations, incorporating Parhae into their own history and reaffirming their territorial claims over the region. They approach issues with self-serving perspectives advantageous to their nations, as if fighting to be the first to claim an item that doesn't have an owner.

Research on Parhae can be divided into two positions. North and South Korea, as well as Japan, traditionally consider Parhae to have been a country with Koguryô origins, while China and Russia consider it a Malgal nation. Despite these similar assumptions, China and Russia each lay claim to Parhae's descendants. For instance, Russian scholars emphasize their relations with Malgals, whose descendants are now scattered throughout Manchuria and Russia's Yanhai Province.

If these differences of opinion are to be overcome, the history of Parhae must be examined objectively. Artifacts scattered throughout China, North Korea, and Russia should be uncovered in a joint archaeological effort and used to supplement the insufficient historical documentation. Currently, outside scholars cannot freely enter North Korea, and because of the nationalistic policies of the Chinese, foreign scholars, especially Koreans, are not allowed access to its historical sites. In particular, they are not permitted to enter Manchuria, the center of Parhae. This

predicament greatly hinders research.

I myself have been forced out of museums and sites several times, while examining Parhae remains. One museum granted me entrance, but employees followed me wherever I went, prohibited note-taking, and eventually told me to leave in the middle of my tour. Similar incidents have occurred every



10th Century Korean stoneware vessel, Harvard University Art Museums

time I have visited China. Once in 1991, I had no choice but to pretend to be a Japanese student in order to carry out my research.

### **Territoriality and History**

There are reasons why China displays such exclusionary attitudes. Although it is now a part of China, Manchuria is a region that serves as a spiritual birthplace of sorts for Koreans. Whenever Koreans travel to China, they visit the Korean autonomous zone in Yanbian province and climb Paektu Mountain. This is because Manchuria was historically the location of Old Chosôn, Puyô, Koguryô, and Parhae. During the colonial period, it was the base of opera-

tions for the Independence Movement, and Koreans continue to live there today. On occasion, some Koreans even extend their desire for North-South reunification to include Manchuria. The Korean media also tends to sympathize with this attitude.

Needless to say, incidents in which some flag-waving Koreans proclaimed that "Manchuria is our land" greatly alarmed the Chinese government and roused concern about these Korean attitudes. Because Koreans living in Manchuria consider Korea their mother country, China is concerned about this issue in terms of their policy towards minorities.

A few years ago, when President Kim Young Sam visited Beijing, he tried to hold a reception for representatives of Koreans living in China. It was a usual diplomatic practice, but the Chinese government considered them to be Chinese rather than Koreans and refused to allow the reception. As a result, the representatives of Koreans living in China, who had traveled all the way to Beijing, had to turn back. This is characteristic of China's policy towards minorities, and research into Manchuria must accommodate this reality.

China's population is composed of the Han people and 55 minorities. Although the Han race makes up 94% of the population, the 55 minorities occupy approximately 60% of Chinese territory. With these simple numbers, one can partly understand why China refuses to recognize the minority separatist movements that arise in regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

This Chinese policy extends to the



Hunting for the past: a cave painting from the Koguryô period

study of history. Accordingly, all that took place within the bounds of what is now Chinese territory is used to bolster the official narrative of Chinese history today. This perspective tends to assimilate the history of minorities or, viewed in a more positive light, to provide the ideological basis for the claim of a single Chinese race. I once read that, in the past, American society used the “melting pot” to explain the assimilation of different peoples into one, but they now use the term “mosaic” or “quilt” to describe their harmonious co-existence. If Chinese policy is seen positively in this light, then their goal can be described as the creation of a “melting pot.”

This is an attempt to link territorial claims with historical ones. As a result, when Korean scholars consider the history of Koguryô and Parhae that took place in Manchuria to be a part of Korean history, the Chinese misin-

terpret this as a claim over Manchurian territory.

In October 1996, Japanese and Chinese scholars gathered in Niigata,

This perspective tends to assimilate the history of minorities or, viewed in a more positive light, to provide the ideological basis for the claim of a single Chinese race.

Japan to hold an academic conference on the history of Parhae. Even there, a debate arose among scholars over whether Parhae history belonged

to Korean or Chinese history. One Chinese scholar accused the Korean scholars of trying to occupy Manchurian territory.

Recently, Chinese scholars have even started to claim Koguryô (37 B.C.–668 A.D.) history as part of Chinese history. Koguryô was a nation that arose in Manchuria and moved its capital to Pyongyang on the Korea peninsula during the middle of its reign. This country,

which together with Paekche and Silla formed the Three Kingdoms, is central to ancient Korean history and is traditionally recognized as part of Korean history. Starting from the 1960s, however, this view was gradually challenged in China. At first, the Chinese, using territory as their frame of reference, argued that the period when the capital remained in Manchuria was part of Chinese history and that the period after the capital moved to Pyongyang was part of Korean history. From the 1980s, they argued that all of Koguryô history until its collapse belonged to Chinese history.

In August 1993, Chinese and Korean scholars attended a Koguryô conference in Jian, the Manchurian capital of Koguryô. In preparation, scholars from both countries agreed not to mention whose history Koguryô belonged to. Yet, as the discussions progressed,

this issue was raised, and a senior North Korean scholar, Pak Si-hyông, openly criticized the Chinese: "Does history change just because territory has changed hands?" A furious debate resulted and, in the end, the conference had to be prematurely adjourned. Afterwards, the Chinese scholars who attended the conference received reprimands,

"Does history change  
just because territory has  
changed hands?"

and now international conferences can no longer be held in Manchuria because of Chinese government prohibitions. The first capital of Koguryô, the Huanren region, has again become closed to foreigners.

### Towards an Open History

Korea and China continue to confront each other over research into the nations of Manchuria. The same problems emerge over research into Old Chosôn and Puyô.

This confrontation arises, in essence, from the attempt to involve history in the quest to legitimize present territorial control. This view is not particular to Chinese scholars. When the Soviet took Yanhai from the Chinese in the 1860s, their insistence that the history of the region, from ancient times to the middle ages, is also a part of their history stems from a similar attitude.

In the 1960s, when territorial conflicts between the Chinese and the Soviet Union were at their height, there was a debate in which both countries claimed Parhae to be part of their own history. The Chinese criticized the Russians for arguments serving their bid for supremacy, while the Soviets told the Chinese to abandon their Sino-centricism.

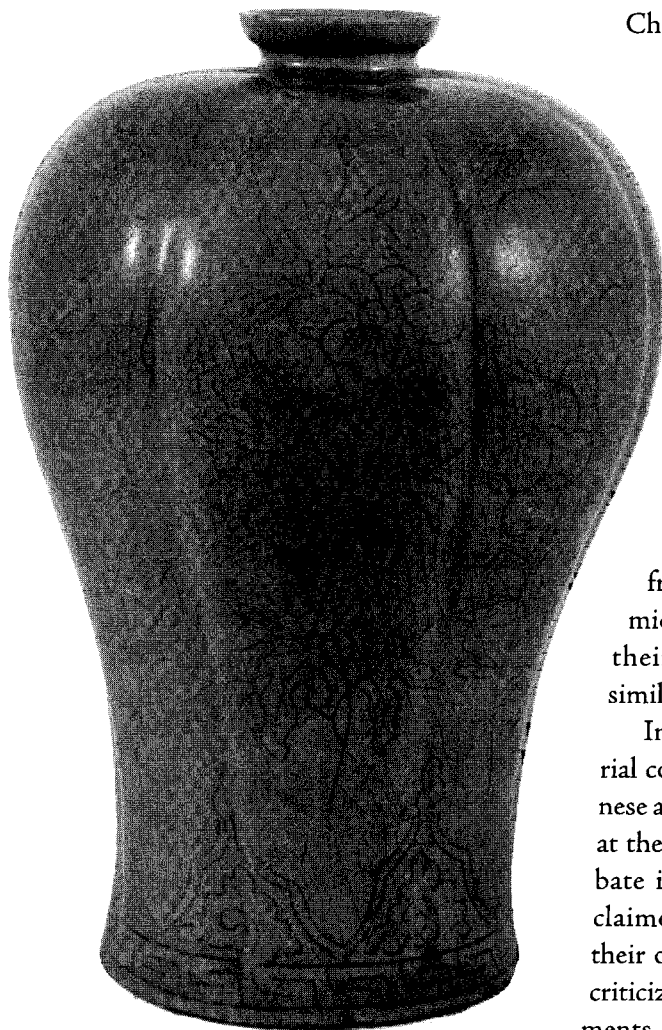
History has become the object of today's political and nationalist manipulations. Territoriality is not eternal. If I receive a piece of land, does its history then become mine? If I lose that land, then do I lose that history? Historical claims cannot keep constantly changing in this manner.

History must be objective. Even if that is not possible, there must at least be an attempt to be objective. Today's goals must be put aside and priority must be given to uncovering the actual contours of the past. A common forum where sources and opinions can be freely exchanged must be prepared for this purpose.

Finally, an open attitude toward history is most important. The history of Parhae should not be viewed as the sole possession of one's own country. Instead, it should be seen as a common history. Mutual confrontation can be changed to mutual cooperation. Parhae was composed of people from Koguryô and the Malgal. Parhae belongs to Korean history if it is seen as an extension of Koguryô, but, from the viewpoint of the Malgal people, it is also a part of Chinese history. We cannot adopt one viewpoint and exclude the other.

By adopting an open attitude, we can approach not only Parhae's history but also all of the history of the Manchurian region with more freedom. The study of history can then prepare the grounds for mutual cooperation between the countries of East Asia. Open history can bring about open nationalism.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is almost upon us. East Asian nations must now join together, overcome their exclusionary ideologies, and prepare an open forum with the doors flung wide open. The study of history will benefit from this endeavor. ■



12th century Koryô celadon ware,  
Harvard University Art Museums