

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Korean archaeology is important not only for understanding the unique sequences of prehistoric events in East Asia, but also for the light it can shed on cultural processes. This book attempts to place the archaeology of Korea in both these contexts, with an emphasis on the variability in the archaeological record and the multiple interpretations given to that variation. In the past decade excavations from the Korean earth have produced a variety of unexpected discoveries, which individually and in the aggregate require a rethinking of Korea's archaeological sequences as well as new understandings of the development of socio-political forms on the Korean peninsula. From paleolithic hand-axes to Silla tombs, from bronze daggers to polished jades, recent archaeological finds demand alternative interpretations of Korean prehistory. Korean archaeologists and a handful of foreign scholars have produced fruitful works, which are summarized and evaluated in this book.

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Korean archaeological interpretations vary in both method and theory. Some are dependent on ancient documents, some on traditions, some on nationalistic pride, some on anthropological concepts. This book seeks to balance these viewpoints, and to present the discoveries based on the best evidence currently available. Probably no Korean archaeologist will agree with all my interpretations, but probably nothing I have written will be without some concurrence.

Several discussions of problems in Korean archaeology help to point up the difficulties and lead to solutions. Western perspectives have been voiced from several different traditions. I present here views from Germany, England, the United States and Italy before turning to the most recent and eloquent Korean statement of concerns and solutions.

Löthar von Falkenhausen (1987) considers four problems in Korean prehistory. First, the problem of the definition of territory. Although in the time period of this book there was no polity of Korea, peoples who might be considered Korean occupied a *Grossraum* (extraterritorial sphere of influence) stretching from the eastern border of the Mongols into central Japan. In speaking of prehistoric Korea, what territory do we mean? Second, Falkenhausen questions whether the inhabitants of this *Grossraum* belong to a single cultural entity. It is possible that dwellers in the Korean peninsula were ethnically hetero-

geneous. We know nothing of either language diversity or self-defined ethnic units. Third, it is necessary to consider whether the appearance of cultural elements from China and Manchuria came about all at once or at different times, and whether these elements arrived by diffusion or movement of peoples. He points out that “it is not enough to know when and from where single new cultural elements came to Korea” (Falkenhausen 1987:4). Finally, Falkenhausen mentions the liability of relying too heavily on the historic texts.

A different set of problems is highlighted by Gina Barnes (1983). She discusses the need to analyze the bases of power and the social structure, particularly of the Wonsamguk and Samguk periods, respectively prehistoric and historic times. The approach to these problems is complicated by the difficulties with periodization, including the lack of congruence between traditional dates and archaeology. Heterogeneity in material culture, she points out, is often interpreted as if it had only one cause (usually temporal change) rather than many, including regional differences and status differences.

Focusing on earlier time periods, Nelson (1983) emphasizes the problems of the over-use of typology, the lack of attention to variability, the need for intensive study of paleoenvironments, and the need to explicate the steps through which conclusions are reached. Maurizio Riotta (1989) is less analytical, but speaks in his preface of “the complex situation of Korean archaeology, where doubts are surely more numerous than certainties.”

Kim Won-yong, in the keynote speech at the Sixth International Conference on Korean Studies, demonstrates that he is aware of these problems, and proposes some directions for the study of Korean culture. First, he attacks the question of what is traditional culture. Pointing out the flow of cultural forms and ideas, he defines traditional culture as “cultural materials that are transmitted and received communally within one society.” He goes on to warn that, “If we are not careful, however, we can mistake the totality of its culture elements for pure racial originality or the culture complex that emerged with the race as an eternally unchanging entity” (Kim W.Y. 1987b:4). He suggests as a research plan that Korean cultural study should look for continuous elements that are the “root and stem.” Kim also notes the “nationalistic inclination” (p. 8) of many scholars, taking North Korean scholars to task for admitting of no foreign influences on the peninsula, and some South Koreans for subjective views.

Since Korean archaeology is often interpreted through a historical lens, it is also useful to consider the differences between the writing of history in North and South Korea. North Korean historians present a strictly Marxist view, dividing the early societies into “primitive” and “ancient” types. Since the definition of ancient society includes slavery, it is necessary to find evidence of this in the early Korean states (Kang M.G. 1990).

Several serious discussions of methodology appeared in Korean journals in the 1980s, discussing classification (Son B.H. 1982), typology (Choi S.N. 1984), seriation (Lee H.J. 1983), chronology (Choi S.N. 1989a, Lee H.J. 1984) and

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radiocarbon dating (Choi S.N. 1982a). These bring a more self-conscious application of various methods to Korean archaeology. Kim Won-yong acknowledges western contributions (1982d), but points with pride to the largely indigenous development of Korean archaeology (1988).

Korean prehistory is frequently formulated in Korea as ethnicity in retrospect, that is, perceiving the elucidation of the formation of the Korean people as the chief purpose of archaeology. The whole Korean peninsula is populated with Koreans, distinct in culture and language from any other group. Korea includes no acknowledged minorities or remnant populations. What is it that makes Koreans a distinct ethnic group? How was that ethnicity forged? Where did the people come from? How much of the culture came with immigrants, and how much grew on peninsular Korean soil? These questions are asked of archaeology, but ethnicity as a concept is difficult to approach with archaeological data. However, applying ethnic labels to archaeological sites is not uncommon, especially in East Asia, where the dominance of the Chinese written tradition seems to demand this response.

The concept of ethnicity is elusive enough when applied to living peoples. How then shall we recognize ethnicity when only the material remnants of cultural systems, impoverished through the ages in various natural and cultural ways, are the major source of data? Archaeologists from opposite sides of the globe have argued that ethnicity cannot be studied with archaeological data (Mongait 1969:17, Rouse 1986:62) or that there are better questions to ask of the data than the “genealogical affinity between two cultural units” (Binford 1968:8). And yet, when considering the archaeology of Korea, it is difficult to avoid the question of ethnicity. Koreans consider the ethnicity of past inhabitants of the Korean peninsula to be the most interesting and important facet of archaeological explanations for several reasons. Rescuing the national history from some colonialist interpretations of the Japanese can be a matter of national pride (e.g. Sohn *et al.* 1987). In a population such as Korea which is now homogeneous in physical type, in language and in culture, the ancestors of one are believed to be the ancestors of all. And for a society which has not been expansionist for over a millennium but on the contrary has been invaded virtually from all sides (with even a cultural invasion from America), the ethnicity of their forebears, the formation of the Korean people distinct from all their neighbors, is an important local concern.

Korea today is a peninsula with a unified culture and language, divided in half by world political decisions which arose from exogenous concerns without reference to the local situation. The peninsula was divided into north and south, and influenced respectively by east and west. The formerly industrialized north – now the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea – with its water power and raw materials, has been economically surpassed by the formerly agricultural south – the Republic of Korea, *Taehan Minguk* – so that recently ROK has ceased to be considered a developing nation and is now a member of the industrialized world.

Neither ethnicity nor environment will explain this phenomenon, although both will contribute to an understanding of the divided peninsula. Only a perspective that includes the effects of world politics and the world economy will allow a full understanding of the situation.

The same is true of prehistory, when the “world” of the Korean peninsula was much smaller, but included large parts of East Asia. As long as the Korean peninsula has been inhabited, even back to the Pleistocene, the inhabitants have participated in regional change and regional events. Ancient Korea cannot be understood apart from ancient East Asia. To use the archaeology of Korea simply to describe the development of the Korean people is to lose some of the richness of explanation which archaeology can provide. Striking relationships in artifact styles and behavioral and organizational patterns link prehistoric Korea to Manchuria and Siberia, as well as to China and Japan. This is not to say that Korean archaeology is merely derivative from its neighbors. Korea’s prehistory reveals its own styles and patterns, its own development. Although there were diverse elements in its formation, Korean ethnicity has deep roots, having been firmly forged no later than AD 668, when United Silla created a political unity in the peninsula. This Koreanness may have been woven from several strands, but it was strongly woven, creating a Korean ethnicity which has tenaciously survived in spite of many centuries of Chinese cultural overlay and more recent Japanese conquest and western influences.

Western views of Korea

The splendors of the archaeology of Korea contrast sharply with western (especially American) stereotypes of the peninsula. The persistent undervaluing of this distinctive, ancient and artistic heritage stems from a number of historical causes. For most Americans, images of Korea were shaped by reports from the Korean War, and are generally negative: bleak, cold, impoverished. Of course, these were not the only impressions brought back. Even in the midst of the war the trained archaeological eye found traces of the past (MacCord 1958). Archaeological discoveries were made by Americans among the later troops, as well (Chase 1960, Bowen 1979), but these are rare exceptions. Soldiers are not necessarily accurate cultural reporters.

In addition to these recent impressions of Korea among the general public, even among scholars a widespread notion lingers that Korean culture is merely a pale imitation of China, or perhaps Japan, and is therefore of secondary importance. While it is true that there are traceable connections with both China and Japan, as noted above, styles, trade goods and people flowed both ways. Korea was sometimes the donor, although more often the recipient, of ideas, things and populations. The cultures that flourished in Korea before the introduction of Buddhism were organized in indigenous Korean ways, and produced some remarkable artifacts and social structures with their own unique characteristics.

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Chinese artifacts in Korean sites stand out as distinct and intrusive items, contrasting sharply in form and ornamentation with analogous Korean artifacts. Korea is not and was not a mere off-shoot of China.

Nor is Korea a clone of Japan. Cultural similarities exist in the present, as in the past, but there are marked differences as well. Much that is common to the two is of Korean origin, or Chinese culture mediated by Korea. Western scholars have been too receptive to Japanese claims of influence on Korea, when the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that for much of the early days the reverse was the case. In the distant past with which this book is concerned, there was no polity of Korea, no unity of the Korean peninsula. But it is often unacknowledged that there was also no “Japan,” and even though the Shang state in China existed in the second millennium BC, the boundaries of the polity (or polities) of early China were considerably less expansive than the China of today. The whole of East Asia was frequently in ferment, with competing groups elbowing and jostling each other, changing and being changed. Archaeology allows us a glimpse of these complex relationships, a hint of the richness of the past mosaic.

Perceiving Korean prehistory as an entity to be studied in its own right, and not as derivative, has another value. It contributes to an understanding of East Asia as a whole, and allows a more balanced reconstruction of prehistory and protohistory in this region than those based merely on Chinese and Japanese documents. The archaeology of Manchuria and Siberia, with important connections to Korea at various times, has also suffered from western preoccupation with China and Japan. The systematic interaction of East Asian cultures, and Korea’s participation in the Chinese “Interaction Sphere” (Chang 1977), can only be appreciated by including Korea’s archaeology on an equal basis.

The view of the prehistory of Korea presented in this volume is an outsider’s view. The potential for increased objectivity inheres in this circumstance, for the author has no nationalistic stake in the interpretations. Both adherence to tradition and conclusions for the sake of national pride are thus minimized. On the other hand, no matter how familiar with the language and culture, the foreigner can never be an insider with shared cultural ideas, some of which may bear upon the prehistoric past. Both outsider and insider perspectives are useful, but they are likely to be different (Rowlands 1987:2).

Geographic limits

Geographically, present-day Korea is separated from the Asian continent by two rivers arising from Paektusan, the highest mountain in Korea, and zigzagging generally northeast and southwest to the coasts. With seas on its other three sides, the Korean boundaries appear to be almost as distinct as those of an island. This, however, is an illusion. Many other boundaries have divided ancient states; there is nothing “natural” about the Yalu and Tumen rivers as a boundary.

Furthermore, the territory within the peninsula did not have a uniform cultural pattern during most of the prehistoric past. However, the geographic integrity of the peninsula may have contributed to the development of a unique cultural and linguistic group, distinguishable from their neighbors on all sides. Since at various times in prehistory and protohistory cultures that can be identified as Korean spread beyond the boundaries of the present divided land, this volume does not rigidly follow the present borders, but also considers relevant much of Manchuria, especially the Liaodong peninsula, at various times in the past.

Korean physical anthropology, language and culture

Careful anthropological studies in many parts of the world have long ago demonstrated that there is no necessary connection between “race,” language and culture (Boas 1940), but, as noted above, modern Korea exhibits a remarkable congruence among the three. The Korean language is a prime example of both the distinctiveness of the peninsula from nearby lands and the relative homogeneity within. The Korean language is a separate language which does not grade by dialects into any other known language. It is spoken as the primary language of the entire Korean population, and dialect differences are minor throughout the length of the peninsula (Lee K.M. 1977).

The Korean and Chinese languages are entirely different and unrelated, although the Korean vocabulary is enriched by Chinese loan words. Like English words from Greek and Latin roots, they are much used in scholarly discourse. Many of these Sino-Korean words have final consonants, possibly preserving ancient Chinese pronunciations to some extent, but some of the variation in pronunciation may also have arisen as assimilation to Korean pronunciation. The Korean and Japanese languages have comparable grammatical structures (Miller 1980), but vocabulary similarities appear to be largely based on identity of Chinese loan words in both languages, and less on common lexical items. The differentiation of the Korean and Japanese languages from a common Altaic stem is believed to have occurred about four thousand years ago (Lee K.M. 1977, Miller 1980). An original homeland in the steppes, followed by a move to a region south of the Altai mountains, is believed to antedate the fragmentation into separate languages (Miller 1986). Linguists place the Tungusic speakers in the Altaic family tree (Lee Y.J. 1982), accounting for the ease with which the bronze-using inhabitants of Korea are pigeonholed as Tungusics.

Koreans as a people can be distinguished as a physical type, different from the Japanese and Chinese. Physical comparison of many kinds, including blood types and fingerprints (Ohno 1970), show the Koreans to be related to their neighbors, but possessing their own distinctive patterns of gene frequencies. Human bones are rare in archaeological contexts and few of those that have been unearthed have been studied, allowing little to be said about the prehistoric population (Kwon 1990, 1986, Kim 1986a:21).

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Distinctively Korean cultural patterns in the present are many. Ethnicity is often expressed most forcefully in traits such as food, clothing and shelter. Korean houses feature the *ondol* floor, a unique heating arrangement of flues conducting warm air from the cooking fire through pipes under the floors to heat the house. Possibly a relative of the heated *kang* bed of north China, the *ondol* floor differs in that it heats entire rooms rather than only the raised bed. Chairs were not traditionally used in Korea; it was more comfortable to sit on a cushion directly on the warm floor. Korean culinary practices also differ from those of China and Japan, both in regard to habitual modes of food preparation and the content of the basic meal. While most Asians eat rice as their basic staple, traditional Korean food runs to soups and stews as well, and lacks both the emphasis on raw sea products of Japan and the chopped dishes of China. Korean *kimchi* may have its counterparts elsewhere, but this vegetable dish is uniquely Korean, dating back to before the introduction of red peppers, when cockscomb flowers were used for spice and color. Traditional Korean clothing is also distinctive, featuring baggy trousers tied at the ankle, and shoes with upturned toes. These differences in the basics of food, clothing and shelter suggest a long cultural continuity, a common ethnicity formed in the distant past. In fact, the *ondol* floor, and jars suitably shaped to have contained a prehistoric ancestor of *kimchi*, occur in prehistoric sites, while traditional clothing and houses are represented in tomb murals of 1,500 years ago and older.

Shamanism, dominated by the female *mudang*, still has adherents in Korea, especially in the countryside where traditional values are best preserved. Kim Won-yong (1990) has pointed to shamanism as a basic trait of the traditional culture. The archaic language used in *kut*, the *mudang* rituals, along with paraphernalia that echoes the distant past, and the use of ancient percussion instruments, all suggest a long development distinct from Japan and China. The emphasis on dance, on rhythmic instruments, and on dangling attachments to the accouterments of the whirling *mudang*, combining noise, glitter and rhythm, hark back to earlier times.

Having made the point, however, that Korea should be seen as a distinct and separate culture not derived from China, it is necessary to reemphasize the need for viewing Korea within the larger perspective of East Asia. Korea was sufficiently isolated at times to develop its own ethnicity, and had enough contact at other times to effect profound changes in the social, economic and political structure. External pressures, from Manchuria, the Soviet Maritime region and eastern Siberia, in addition to Japan and China, must be taken into account along with internal development. In the attempt to explain the “acceptance” of cultural traits from outside in terms of the culture itself, the possibility of sheer force applied by a technologically dominant external culture, which has its own political and economic goals, cannot be overlooked.

Data sources

The data in this book largely derive from archaeological excavations and surveys. Archaeology in Korea is of relatively recent vintage, and excavations in its short history have been uneven in quality. Apart from an attempt by a certain Chong Chi-hae in 1748 to identify his ancestral tomb by means of digging into a mound (Kim W.Y. 1981:22), the first continued interest in Korea's antiquities was evinced by Japanese archaeologists, after the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. Tombs were the initial target of investigation, especially those around Kyongju, Pyongyang and Jian, centers of early Korean capitals. Spectacular finds of usually perishable artifacts including lacquerware, basketry, and cloth attracted worldwide attention. Some attention was paid to megalithic monuments ("dolmens"), which are denser in Korea than elsewhere in East Asia, and some neolithic sites were noted and collected. Perhaps fifty reports resulted from these surveys and excavations (Choi M.L. 1984b:13).

During World War II, archaeology in Korea languished, and since the division of the country at the 38th parallel at the end of World War II it has had separate histories in its two parts. The Korean War provided another setback to archaeological excavations, although at least one site was hastily excavated when exposed by military operations (MacCord 1958). Gradually, following the truce of 1953 when the peninsula was once again divided roughly in the middle, Koreans in both North and South have taken a keen interest in their own past. Archaeology has diverged between North and South, and even the publications look substantially different. In North Korea only *han'gul*, the Korean alphabet, is used (along with quotations from Kim Il-sung), while most archaeological reports in the south include a generous sprinkling of Sino-Korean words represented by Chinese characters.

Over a hundred Korean scholars are now trained in archaeology and various related disciplines, actively pursuing archaeological research in South Korea, in addition to unknown numbers of archaeologists active in the north. Several archaeology journals are being published, and site reports appear from all the major universities and museums as well as some smaller ones. Archaeological reports from the north have been difficult to obtain, and at one time were illegal to own in the Republic of Korea. With the movement toward reunification, however, information about North Korean archaeology has become available in the south (Im 1985b), and an entire bibliography of publications from the north has recently been published (Yi, Lee and Shin 1989).

Excavations with research designs are rare. Much more attention has been paid to the necessary preliminaries of constructing chronologies and typologies than to culture process (Nelson 1983). Systematic surveys have become standard procedures with the need for salvage archaeology at dam sites and for road and building construction, resulting in large numbers of newly discovered sites which must be assessed. Supporting independent environmental evidence is only

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beginning to be collected and studied by palynologists, paleobotanists, zoologists and geologists, but a great deal of important new evidence has been collected in the past decade.

Documentary sources relate to the protohistory of Korea rather than to pre-history. Purporting to apply to time periods as far back as the end of the Shang dynasty (1122 BC by traditional dating), these documents cannot be accepted uncritically, but neither can they be entirely discounted. Several kinds of texts, written variously in China, Korea and Japan, have pertinent passages, but these ancient writings may be suspect on many grounds. Errors may have crept in as a result of miscopying, editing or deliberate distortion. Some documents are only fragments of the original writings. To the Chinese, Korea was a distant place, inhabited by “barbarians” whose chief value lay in the tribute which might be extracted. No consistency is found in the documents with regard to the kind of information available either through time or within specific regions of Korea. Some of the Chinese documents describe battles in meticulous detail, and others itemize quaint customs. The geography is vague, and scholars disagree about the locations of named rivers or other features. Discussions of the Chinese documents themselves can be found in Gardiner (1969a) and Parker (1890), which also contain partial translations into English.

The Korean *Samguk Sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms) and *Samguk Yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) were written in their present form much later than the events they record, although it is thought that they are based on early documents no longer extant. Each of these documents views Korean history through its own distorting lens, either Confucian or Buddhist, presenting mythic founding legends and detailed historical events as equally credible. Japanese sources, more nearly contemporaneous with the Three Kingdoms, tend to ascribe a secondary status to Korea, a stance which may have arisen from motives other than historical accuracy. Some Korean history, especially from the Paekche Kingdom, may be among the sources for the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki*, although with reinterpretations to fit the Japanese model (Hong 1988).

A large literature in several languages covers the exegesis of this body of material, some by scholars with knowledge of ancient as well as modern forms of the original languages, and contrary opinions have been voiced concerning nearly every point. I have noted differences of reading when relating the ancient writings to the archaeological record. The documents are used in this volume not for the purpose of reconstructing historical events, but as paleoethnographic material to be tested against archaeological evidence and occasionally to add detail and color to the dry recitation of archaeological finds.

Ethnographic analogy is used sparingly in this volume. The most useful analogies stem from Korea itself; Korean archaeologists frequently perceive continuities between present and past. Korea has not merely preserved some ancient lifeways and traditions, it has preserved many largely unmixed with exogenous traditions (Osgood 1954). Korea has tended to compartmentalize foreign

cultures into separate realms and to maintain an ancient core of traditional norms and behavior relatively unchanged.

Archaeological analogy is also used, to some extent, as much to test the applicability of archaeological inferences from other regions as to supply hypotheses about prehistoric Korea. For example, Korea is in a continental position similar to that of western Europe. Since Korea was partly conquered by Han China as Britain was partly conquered by Rome, there may be lessons to learn from the similarities and differences. General explanations applied to western Europe should be equally applicable to Korea, especially when the explanatory device is related to the geographic position at the edge of the continent.

Korean archaeological sequences

The development of Korean culture can be seen both as a unique history of particular events in the past and as one example of systematic and general cultural processes. But because the specifics of Korean prehistory and protohistory are not generally known in the west, these details need to be presented and the framework of the specific historical sequence constructed before we can begin to understand the processes of these changes.

I have not used the traditional terms paleolithic, neolithic, bronze age and iron age as chapter headings, because these terms are used in Korea with little consistency. The typology of band, tribe, chiefdom and state has been applied to Korean archaeology, but in my opinion the Korean case is not illuminated by reference to this sequence of evolutionary steps. Pigeonholing, or worse, results when, like Cinderella's step-sisters, we must cut off their heels or toes to fit the case. All divisions into time periods are of course arbitrary, but I have chosen to divide the seamless archaeological record into chapters according to major changes in organization, as evident in the archaeological record itself.

After a chapter on the Korean environment, discussion of the archaeology begins with small groups of foragers whose remains pose questions of temporal placement, relationships with other groups in Asia, and the nature of their foraging way of life. Unanticipated recent finds of hand-axes, originally touted as dating from the Middle Pleistocene (but now disputed), have posed new questions while supplying the beginnings of some answers. Other newly excavated cave and open-air sites add new dimensions to an understanding of paleolithic Korea. A number of sites with microcores, microblades, ski-spall blades and the like probably represent a transitional period between the foragers and the early village settlements (Chapter 3).

A ceramic horizon with settled villages appears in Korea with various styles and dates around the peninsula. This manifestation seems to be related to the widespread appearance of simple pottery containers in Asia as early as 12,000 years ago, corresponding to the earliest radiocarbon date for this period. Many more dates cluster around 6000 BC. Although this development is often called