**East Asian History: A Tripolar Approach** *and*

**Ancient Korea-Japan Relations: Paekche and the Origin of the**

**Yamato Dynasty** *by* Wontack Hong

Book Review by **Juha Janhunen** in “Correctness and Controversies in Asian Historiography,” ***Studia Orientalia*,**109 (2010), pp. 136-9.

History cannot be written free of values, and the closer to the present day we move the less hope there is for the historian to reach any credible level of objectiveness. This is particularly obvious when we compare national historiographies, which often defend diametrically opposite points of view concerning past controversies. The principal factor regulating the historiographical picture that is transmitted to us is the well-known circum stance that the losers rarely get their voice heard. One possible conclusion is that history always goes the “right” way. It is, however, also possible that history is more diversified than the historians writing for the winners would like to admit.

Unger’s book demonstrates well the situation that the leaders in Koreo-Japanese studies today are international scholars based in Europe and the United States, but not in Korea or Japan. This is easy to understand as the issues that have to be dealt with are highly volatile in the context of the national historiographies of the two countries. It will take a long time before a Korean historian or linguist can openly admit that the one-time homeland of the Japanese language lies on the Korean Peninsula, and that Korea was not always the monolingual Korean entity it is today. On the other hand, the idea that Korea has played a crucial role in the origins of Japan is not easily digestible for the Japanese historian or linguist, who would rather emphasize the role of local innovation.

The problem is not made easier by the circumstance that Japan during its brief period of colonial rule over Korea (1910–1945) tried to explain all the historical connections between the two countries as having been initiated from the Japanese side. The claim was that Korea, or some parts of it, had been a Japanese “colony” already in protohistorical times. The reality is, of course, the opposite, since it was Japan that was colonized from Korea. Ever since the end of the isolation of the Jŏmon period, there has been a constant flow of demographic, cultural, and linguistic influences from Korea to Japan, which means that, historically, Japan has always been secondary to Korea. There is one important exception, however: Japan was the first to modernize, and it was exactly this discrepancy that became the root of the modern problems between the two countries.

There is also one important exception among the scholars with a background in the region: **Wontack Hong**. By principal profession an economist (now retired from Seoul National University), Hong is equally prolific as an author of historical surveys pertaining to the relations between Korea and Japan. Moreover, unlike most Western scholars working in the field, he makes the right emphasis in that he focuses on the role of Paekche in the formation of Japan. By no coincidence, he publishes his books from “Kudara International” (*Kudara* being the Japanese name of Paekche).

His most important contribution to the field so far is the fresh two-volume set comprising one volume on the general history of East Asia and the other on the specific sphere of issues connected with the protohistorical relations between Korea and Japan. These books deserve special recognition not only for their insightful approach but also for their elegant design, with high-quality color pictures, maps, and extracts from primary sources integrated in the whole in a reader-friendly way. As far as the text is concerned, Hong is not afraid of disclosing what he sees as “distortions in East Asian History”. By the “tripolar approach” he means that East Asia should not be viewed from the traditional Sinocentric perspective (= the monopolar approach), nor in a framework involving China and “the unified nomads in the steppe” (= the bipolar approach), but, rather, in terms of a system of interaction between three actors of equal weight, but with different roles: China (the southern sedentary cultures), Mongolia (the northwestern nomadic cultures), and Manchuria (the northeastern seminomadic and sedentary cultures). This is a holistic frame work conceptualized by Gari Ledyard and Thomas Barfield (as well as by the present author), and as a model for understanding East Asian history it does not seem to have alternatives. Even so, much research is still being done on East Asia in the spirit of obsolete paradigms, which is why Hong’s two books certainly serve a purpose as a healthy reminder of how things can also be seen.

The first of the two volumes is essentially a handbook of East Asian political and cultural history, chronologically arranged, and with a focus on Manchuria, historio- graphically the most neglected component of the tripolar complex. Special attention is paid to the relations between continental Manchuria and Korea. The succession Yemaek-Chosŏn-Koguryŏ-Parhae is identified by Hong as “Macro-Tungusic,” a not unreasonable identification in view of the fact that the historical Jurchen-Manchu may also be seen as parts of the same succession. Other ethnolinguistic continuities established by Hong include Sushen-Yilou-Mohe-Nüzhen (=‘Tungusic’), Puyŏ-Koguryŏ-Silla (=‘Korean’), and Puyŏ-Koguryŏ-Paekche (= ?). However, as may be seen, these are not always mutually consistent. Like many historians, Hong does not make a strict distinction between political formations, ethnic groups, and languages.

Incidentally, southeastern Manchuria has become an issue of modern diplomatic dispute between South Korea and China, since both countries include the Koguryŏ-Parhae succession in their national historiographies. As Hong notes, the controversy began already a thousand years ago, when the Parhae territory was divided between the Koryŏ kingdom based on the Korean Peninsula and the Liao-Jin empires based in Manchuria and northern China. Territorially, the actual heir of Koguryŏ-Parhae today is, of course, North Korea, and Hong raises the interesting possibility that the Chinese government “is trying to clear the ground to take over North Korea when it collapses, and absorb it, *à la* Tibet, into the great Chinese empire.” It is exactly this kind of politically incorrect statements that make the reading of Hong’s books so refreshing. It may be mentioned that, to counteract China’s hidden goals, the South Korean government founded, in 2006, the “North East Asian History Foundation”, which has “the goal of laying the basis for peace and prosperity in East Asia by resolving historical conflicts in the region”

According to Hong, the tripolar approach ceased to be valid with the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911). On this he may be wrong, however, for with the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) the roles of Mongolia and Manchuria were taken over by Russia and Japan, respectively. The prewar Japanese expansion on the continent can very well be seen as Japan’s attempt to play the role of the Manchurian component in the East Asian tripolar system. The “puppet state” of Manchukuo (1931–1945), which Hong calls a “Pseudo-Qing restauration,” is a particularly difficult topic to deal with, and it will take time before an objective history of it can be written, especially since the postwar Western historiography is also seriously distorted concerning this detail. Another difficult area is formed by the Russo-Korean relationships. It seems that Korean historians (not to speak of politicians) have not realized that Russia is Korea’s only natural friend in the region, and the only neighboring country that does not profit from the continued division of Korea.

The second volume by Hong is more strictly focused on the proto historical period, though it also has a modern political dimension. The principal objective of the book is to bring forth evidence in favor of the “Kudara-Yamato model,” according to which the immediate origins of Yamato Japan were located in Paekche. The evidence itself is generally well known, extending from historical records to obvious cultural and archaeological parallels, but the problem is that the relevant facts have never been recognized by the Japanese national historiography. This forces Hong to criticize “the claustrophobic narrowness of the Japanese academic tradition” as a whole, a criticism that is certainly justified at least as far as the fields of archaeology and history are concerned. To support his analysis, Hong also refers to recent cases of outright fabrication, which have certainly not raised the reputation of Japanese archaeology.

It has to be said that Hong himself is also not completely free of nationalist pretensions. For instance, he is not willing to recognize the fact that Paekche, like Silla and Koguryŏ (in its later form), was founded in the fourth century and not before. Hong is also wrong when he claims that Western historians only “echo the contentions of Japanese scholars” on this point, for here Western historiography has no reason to take any other stand except one based on facts. On the other hand, Hong may well be right when he criticizes Japanese historians for not accepting the data suggesting the military presence of Paekche as far northwest as the Liaoxi region. In fact, this northern dimension of Paekche might explain why some Japonic-looking toponyms are registered from the Koguryŏ territory, a circumstance that has led Beckwith (and many others) to mislabel these toponyms as representing the “Old Koguryŏ” language.

Hong correctly refutes the Horse Rider theory of the late Egami Namio, according to whom the Japanese state was founded under the direct impact of the semi-mythical Puyŏ tribesmen based in central Manchuria, a sheer impossibility in view of the strength of the Koguryŏ kingdom immediately south of the Puyŏ. According to Hong, the hidden objective of the Horse Rider theory was to minimize the role of Korea as a source of Japanese cultural roots. It has to be noted, however, that the Puyŏ figure also in Korean historiography, and Hong himself derives influences from them not only to Koguryŏ, but also to Paekche and Silla. Although the Puyŏ-Koguryŏ-Paekche link is to some extent corroborated by historical sources, the significance of this link should not be exaggerated. In particular, the diffusion of cultural influences should not be understood as binding evidence of population movements or linguistic expansions.

In contrast to the diffuse role of Puyŏ and Koguryŏ, the role of Paekche in the early history of Japan is beyond any doubt. Not only was the Paekche territory the region from where the Yayoi culture spread to Japan, but also, the political and military ties between Paekche and Yamato suggest an intimate partnership that is best explained by assuming an ethnic affinity. Hong must be right when he claims that “a member of the Paekche royal family – carried out the conquest of the Yamato region – in the late fourth century”, thus laying the foundations of Japan as a political state. Much of Hong’s book is devoted to the summarizing of the archaeological, historical, folkloric, and even onomastic evidence in favor of this claim. He also notes the inherent bias of the historical sources, for even *Samguk Sagi* was compiled in a spirit favorable to Silla and hostile towards Paekche. The information available on Kaya, the “fourth” kingdom in protohistorical Korea, may be even less reliable.

Unfortunately, being not a linguist, Hong gets lost when it comes to the linguistic correlations of the historical situation. In his formulation, “the basic structure of the proto-Japanese language” was provided by “the Kaya dialect of the Korean language”, though “lexically – and phonologically – the influence of Ainu and Malayo-Polynesian languages could have been substantial”. This is a claim that seems to follow the popular line of reasoning which explains Japanese as a “mixed” language. However, there is a more or less complete consensus among linguists today that there are no “mixed” languages. If Japanese had originally been based on a “dialect of the Korean language”, the two languages would have to be close relatives, which they are not. Not even Unger, who believes in the original genetic affinity of Japanese and Korean, would think that the difference between the two languages was still at a dialectal level during the protohistorical period.

This shows the limitations of Hong’s reasoning, for he, too, is unable to free himself from a nationalist line of historiography. Accepting the fact that Korean and Japanese represent two different linguistic lineages, not even related to each other, but that both of them were spoken in parallel on the Korean Peninsula in proto historical times, possibly together with several other languages, is simply too much to digest for a Korean scholar. However, in spite of this forgivable flaw which only time can repair, Hong’s two books are, in general, much better argumented than anything presented by Japanese historians or even linguists during the recent decades. This is a good beginning on which a more profound understanding can be built concerning the early relationships of Korea and Japan, two nations that are historically more profoundly intertwined than either of them would like to admit.

It happens that the Koreo-Japanese historical relations are also the topic of a recent collective volume produced for the above-mentioned “Northeast Asian History Foundation”. This volume, containing 40 articles, is an abridged English version of a Korean original with as many as 98 articles in three volumes. Compared with the professional and sophisticated approach of Hong Wontack, the authors of this volume are much more explicitly political, which, unfortunately, reduces the credibility of their message. Formally, their goal is to “bring an end to confrontational and negative historical views”, but the volume fails to reach this end since it only presents the Korean point of view. This is understandable as all the contributors are native Koreans, but the critical reader cannot avoid the feeling of being underestimated. As always in the case of propaganda literature camouflaged as “historical truth”, the volume has essentially a counterproductive effect.