

When Historical Terms Lose Their Validity: Reevaluating Silla’s “Unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea”

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Abstract

The names given to historical events often change along with changes in interpretation. This article examines the established historical term Samguk Tongil Jeonjaeng (Unification War of the Three Kingdoms of Korea), focusing on how this seventh-century war in East Asia unfolded and how its name has changed over time. On this topic, previous discussions have centered on the idea of the nation. They have mainly been about how the historical term reveals the formative moment of the Korean nation or how it either expands or limits the coverage of Korean history. However, this paper explores new possibilities to move beyond the historical assumption of the nation as the main subject with a center-periphery structure and rhetoric of domination and subordination. For this study, it is necessary to emphasize the interconnected nature of East Asia as a new community and to transcend the paradigm of modern nationalism and the discourse of dominant-subordinate structures. For this purpose, the present article does not limit itself to examining the seventh-century war simply in terms of the national unification but attempts to interpret it as an opportunity to foster a new East Asian community.

Keywords

Unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, Unified Silla, North-South States Period, Samhan Unification, historical terms

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Same War, Different Names

The South Korean poet Kim Chun-su says in his famous work “The Flower” that a gesture becomes a flower when it is called by a name that suits its color and fragrance. He says that a being can at last have meaning when called by a name, and academic historians have long accepted this rhetoric. It is the historian’s role to identify and name meaningful events among the numerous fragments of the past, akin to drawing a constellation by selecting only a few stars in the night sky. Historians must clearly distinguish between the past as fact and history as interpretation. The name they give depends on the meaning they convey, and the meaning they convey depends on the time and the space in which we live. The demands of the times differ according to the conditions of society; this is why the same historical event has been called by different names.

The term Yugio sabyeon (6.25 事變, June 25th Incident) has been used to emphasize North Korea’s responsibility for the start of the Korean War since the Rhee Syng-man regime. The use of the term has not only fostered hostility and hatred against North Korea, but it has also made it easy to forget about the armed conflicts before June 25, 1950, such as skirmishes along the 38th parallel like the Battle of Hill 292, or the partisan guerrilla warfare in Jirisan Mountain. Starting in the 1980s, the term Korean War (韓國戰爭) began to be commonly used internationally to reflect the war’s international nature (Kim C. 1989, 25–63). After the 2000s, those who looked forward to Korea’s reunification proposed the term Yugio nambuk jeonjaeng (6.25 南北戰爭, 6.25 War between North and South Korea) to stress that the war was essentially a civil war between those of the same ethnicity. (Lee 2003, 339–374). In brief, different names have been given to the same war, as the discovery of new data and the accumulation of research have deepened our understanding. It is also due to the historical demand for peace, as we move beyond the ideological conflicts of the Cold War era.

Has this kind of terminological variation occurred only for the Korean War? Not really. The same is true for the term Imjin waeran (壬辰倭亂, Japanese Invasion of Korea in the Year of Imjin) in Korean history.

Historians have noted that on the one hand, the term *waeran* (倭亂) indicates Joseon Dynasty's intention to morally condemn Japan for causing the war. On the other hand, the term's narrow scope conceals the dynamics and diversity of Joseon society as seen in the case of Korean commoners' participation in the Righteous Army (義兵) campaigns, as well as the war's international nature. Therefore, new terms such as *Imjin*¹ *jeonjaeng* (壬辰戰爭, Imjin War) (Ha 2011, 331–367), *Dongasia 7-nyeon Jeonjaeng* (東亞細亞 七年戰爭, East Asian Seven Years War) (Kim G. 2012, 61–86),² and *Dongasia Samguk Jeonjaeng* (東亞細亞 三國戰爭, The War of East Asian Three Countries) (Chung 2007),³ have been suggested. On the other hand, in Japan, the same war has been called *Chōsen seibat-su* (朝鮮征伐, Conquest of Korea). This term connotes their perception of the war as a 'holy war' or a 'just war' as well as their aspiration to be the center of the international order.

The aspiration materialized at the beginning of the twentieth century when Japan became an imperialist power and incorporated Korea as its colony. To reeducate Koreans as subjects of the Japanese Empire, national policy research was conducted. The research found that a new name was needed for the sixteenth-century war between Korea and Japan, reflecting the fact that Korea, which had already been colonized, was no longer the object of conquest but 'one body with Japan.' Thus, the war was renamed *Bunroku Keichō no eki* (文祿慶長の役, War in the Years of Bunroku and Keichō) (Ikeuchi 1914),⁴ which made it sound like

¹ *Imjin* (壬辰) stands for 1592 in the sexagenary cycle and refers to the first invasion of Japan, which took place from 1592 to 1593. Japan's second invasion took place from 1597 to 1598, and thus is sometimes called *Jeongyu jaeran* (丁酉再亂, Second Japanese Invasion of Korea in the Year of Jeongyu) as 1597 is a Jeongyu year in the sexagenary cycle. However, the two invasions are generally referred to as the "Imjin War."

² The Seven Years War literally means the time span of the first invasion (1592–1593) and the second invasion (1597–1598).

³ In this war, not only Japan and the Joseon Dynasty, but also the Ming dynasty participated. Thus, it could be called the "Three Countries War."

⁴ *Bunroku* (文祿, 1592–1596) is the Japanese era name (年號) for the Emperor Go-Yōzei (後陽成), and *Keichō* (慶長, 1596–1615) is the era name after *Bunroku*. Since *eki* (役) is a relatively value-neutral term meaning "war" or "military campaign," it may be argued that *Bunroku Keichō no eki*

a civil war. Yet again, in post-1945 Japan, another proposal was made to change the war's name to Chōsen shinryaku (朝鮮侵略, Invasion of Korea) (Kitajima 1982). This new name also reflected the demand of the time, namely, a critical examination of the prewar historical studies that served Japanese imperialism.

Let us return to seventh-century East Asia and discuss the war commonly called Samguk tongil jeonjaeng (三國統一戰爭, Unification War of the Three Kingdoms of Korea).⁵ Samguk Tongil is the terminological expression of the Silla (新羅) Kingdom's unification of the Korean peninsula. According to East Asian Confucian ideology, ruling power became legitimate when it was deemed to have been mandated by heaven, and it was in this sense that the Chinese emperor was referred to as the Son of Heaven (天子, Tianzi). Likewise, when the Goryeo (高麗) and Joseon (朝鮮) dynasties succeeded the Silla Kingdom as the rulers of Korea, they legitimized their successions by establishing an orthodox historical lineage from Silla through Goryeo to Joseon. In addition, this Silla-centered discourse of historical orthodoxy excludes Goguryeo (高句麗) and Baekje (百濟) Kingdoms, the vanquished of the unification war, and Balhae (渤海), the successor of Goguryeo.⁶ Then, would the other parties

cannot be regarded as a term with an internal war (civil war) connotation. However, the fact that such terminology began to be used only after the forced annexation of Korea suggests an intention to view Korea not as a target of conquest, but as a region already subjugated.

⁵ In this article, Unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea (三國統一) and Samhan Unification (一統三韓) are used separately. While both terms mean Goguryeo (高句麗), Baekje (百濟), and Silla (新羅) merged into one, the backgrounds of the two terms are different. First, in the case of Samhan Unification, it was already used since the Silla period. The original meaning was to combine Mahan (馬韓), Jinhan (辰韓), and Byeonhan (弁韓) into one, not Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan were reincorporated into Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo, respectively, and regarding the timing of the reincorporation, there are the seventh century thesis (Kim 2010, 293–327) and the ninth century thesis (Yoon G. 2019b, 265–307). The term Unification of the Three Kingdoms is eventually a concept with Unified Silla in mind. The term Unified Silla is considered as an invention by the colonialist historians of the twentieth century (Yoon S. 2007, 125–142), and an appropriation from the pre-modern Samhan Unification (一統三韓) (Kim 2009, 373–395).

⁶ Goryeo adopted the name “Goryeo” to justify its succession to Goguryeo, the overthrow of Silla, and the establishment of a new dynasty amid the turmoil of the Later Three Kingdoms period. However, *Samguksagi*, a historical record compiled under government sponsorship during the

of the seventh-century war, including Goguryeo and Baekje in Korea and the Tang (唐) dynasty in China, have agreed to call it the unification war of the Three Kingdoms of Korea? Does the naming of this ancient historical event and its historical orthodoxy still matter to us living in a democratic republic? The purpose of this article is to trace the ways in which the seventh-century Korean war has been evaluated and to examine the names it has been called. One of the important lessons that this investigation will teach is that a war's name may not reflect its actual nature or consequences.

Changes in Name

"Samhan has become one household, and people do not have different minds (三韓爲一家 百姓無二心). Even though we have not yet reached peace, we can say that it has come to a lull." [*Samguksagi* (三國史記, *History of the Three Kingdoms*). In Book 42, Yeoljeon (列傳) 3 Biography of Kim Yu-sin, vol. 2]

This remark, which Kim Yu-sin (金庾信) made when he paid a visit to the sick King Munmu (文武王), can be considered the first to describe the outcome of the seventh-century war as Samhan Unification (三韓一統). Historians view this record as an invention during the time of King Sinmun (神文王, 665–692) or as an example of the propaganda common during the later period of the Silla Kingdom. However, it is clear that already in the Silla period, there were attempts to ascribe the term Samhan Unification to this war, thereby legitimizing its rulership and justifying its dominance. Whether the war was the main factor in the unification of Korea is less important than the ensuing effect of the term creation. In the tenth century, Gyeon Hwon (甄萱) and Gung Ye (弓裔) led the revival of Baekje and Goguryeo Kingdoms, and Korea was again divided into

Goryeo dynasty, focuses on Silla among the Three Kingdoms, and reflects a narrative and system that emphasizes Silla's so-called "unification" achievements and its flexible diplomacy with the Tang Dynasty (Han 1994, 47–48).

three Kingdoms—what is commonly called the Later Three Kingdoms Period. When Goryeo subdued them and achieved reunification, they could repeat the cause of Samhan Unification, making Silla's earlier accomplishment more solid. This orthodox line of Korean rulership, namely, from the Three Kingdoms and Silla to Goryeo and Joseon, was confirmed by later historical records, including *Samguksagi* written by Kim Bu-sik (金富軾) in the twelfth century, *Dongguktonggam* (東國通鑑, Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern State) by Seo Geo-jeong (徐居正) and others in the fifteenth century, and *Dongsagangmok* (東史綱目, Compendium of Eastern History) by Ahn Jeong-bok (安鼎福) in the eighteenth century.

These confirmations had the effect of excluding the Balhae Kingdom (698–926) from the canonical history. While Balhae was an indispensable part of the historical perception of East Asia, it was always figured as the other in the dominant historical writings until the end of the eighteenth century. Balhae stayed in the historiographical periphery since neither China nor Korea wanted to include it in the orthodox line. The government-compiled historical books of Goryeo and Joseon Korea adhered to the thesis of the Silla orthodoxy, and thus they excluded Balhae as the enemy and the other; in fact, Balhae, the claimed successor of Goguryeo, was in confrontation with Silla. Similarly, in China's history books, Balhae appeared only in the Biographies (列傳) sections, which covered neighboring states, and not in the main sections.

In contrast, two nineteenth-century books, *Haedong yeoksa* (海東繹史, Elucidated History of East of the Sea) by Han Chi-yun (韓致齋) and Han Jin-seo (韓鎭書), and *Daedongjiji* (大東地志, Geographical Notations on the Great East) by Kim Jeong-ho (金正浩), represented the emergence of a different perspective from *Balhaego* (渤海考, History of Balhae) compiled by Yu Deuk-gong (柳得恭) at the end of the eighteenth century. Notably, these two books did not perceive Balhae as an enemy or the other, questioned Silla's monopolization of historical orthodoxy, and advanced the thesis of North-South States (南北國, North being Balhae and South being Unified Silla). In this new historical discourse, the result of the seventh-century war could no longer be viewed as Samhan (三韓)

Unification. The upheaval in East Asia, which began with the advent of the Qing (清) dynasty in the seventeenth century, was an important trigger for the intellectuals of Joseon Korea to revisit and reverse their previous non-recognition of the northern region, where Balhae had been located. (Cho 2009, 49-90) At this time, East Asia countries that had adapted to the Ming (明)-centered international order were accepting a new East Asian order centered around the Qing dynasty of the Jurchen people (女眞), who had been despised as barbarians. This change served as the background for the change in Hwayi (華夷) theory,⁷ giving new recognition to Joseon Korea's indigenous and traditional culture, sparking interest in domestic history. In other words, Korean intellectuals began to recognize the independence of their own history, overcoming the China-centric worldview. As social conditions changed, so did the meaning of the seventh-century war. Whereas the discourse of Silla orthodoxy referred to it as a unification war, the new thesis of North-South States designated its outcome as the coexistence with Balhae. In addition, in the logic of the new thesis, the task of unification was to be assigned to Goryeo, not to Silla. In this way, the meaning of Samhan Unification (一統三韓) was erased from the reference of the seventh-century war.

Yet again, the argument of Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms reappeared in the modern era. The advent of modern society in Korea, which began in the late nineteenth century, demanded the overcoming of the traditional way of thinking and causationism. However, Korea's efforts to recodify its history were hindered by its colonization by Japan. Following Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, Japanese academ-

⁷ The Hwayi (華夷) theory stands for a recognition system that distinguishes *junghwa* (中華) as civilization and *yijeok* (夷狄) as barbarism. Since its founding, the Joseon Dynasty acknowledged only the Ming dynasty as a civilized country. Then, the Jurchen (女眞), which had been classified as barbarians since the seventeenth century, militarily conquered the center of the civilization, Ming dynasty, and founded Qing China, thus breaking a crack in the existing Hwayi theory. Joseon faced a political reality that could no longer discriminate or neglect Qing as barbarism. New understanding and redefinition of civilization and barbarism were necessary. Among the intellectuals in Joseon, groups were divided in accordance to the definition of civilization and barbarism, and attitudes toward Qing. (Huh 2009)

ics began to focus their attention on Manchuria. Under the slogan of “Study’s Contribution to the National Policy,” they did basic studies on how Japanese imperialism could effectively manage Manchuria and Korea and conducted detailed research of the historical geography of Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula.⁸ These academic activities served the ulterior purpose of demonstrating the importance of managing Manchuria for the stable colonial rule of Korea. With the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s and the establishment of Manchukuo in 1934, the Japanese intellectual maneuver further expanded. They advanced a series of colonialist historical theses, including the claim that Korean history was characterized by its peninsular nature and that Korea was subordinated by Manchuria, to justify the argument for the separation of Manchuria from China and to advocate the so-called Manseon View of History (滿鮮史觀, Japanese colonialist view of Manchuria-Korea history). The reasoning behind this Japanese imperialist claim was that if Manchuria were separated from China and Korea were subordinate to Manchuria, colonial rule over both Manchuria and Korea would become more efficient (Inoue 2013). To uphold this imperialist logic, it was important for the Japanese to find evidence in the historical changes in the inner boundary between Korea and Manchuria. Aiming to write a different history for Manchuria and Korea, the advocates of the Manseon View of History emphasized Silla’s unification of Korea thesis, severed Balhae from Korean history, and reincorporated it into Manchurian history. In brief, the utility of Silla’s orthodox discourse was rediscovered during Japanese colonial rule of Korea, and the thesis of Silla’s unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea reappeared as part of the expansionist policy of Japanese imperialism (Kim 2011, 37–75).

Opposing and overcoming the Japanese colonialist history was the

⁸ The Manseon Historic-Geographical Research Center (滿鮮歷史地理調查部) established in 1908 by South Manchuria Railway Company (南滿洲鐵道株式會社) and Tokyo Imperial University (東京帝國大學) tried to clarify the boundaries between China and Korea by identifying the historical boundary between Manchuria and Korea. The result was published in 16 volumes of *Manseonjiriyeksayeongubogo* (滿鮮地理歷史研究報告, Manseon Historic-Geographical Research Report).

task for contemporary Korean historians and intellectuals. In the early 1900s, Korean intellectuals, including Shin Chae-ho (申采浩), suggested that the nation could take a form that would continue to exist autonomously despite its state being usurped by imperialist powers. After Korea's liberation, Son Jin-tae (孫晉泰) and others reinterpreted Silla's unification of Korea as a crucial factor in the historical establishment of the nation's identity (Schmid 2007, 403–461). Here again, the same term was used but for a different purpose. While Japanese colonialist historians exploited the discourse of ancient Korea's unification by Silla to distinguish the history of Korea from that of Manchuria and to serve imperialist policy, Korean nationalist historians appropriated it for the purpose of restoring national history and as a means of resisting imperialism. In this manner, the thesis of unification of the Three Kingdoms was reappropriated (Kim 2011, 37–75). In post-liberation Korea, attempts were made to adjust the historical understanding of Unified Silla and Balhae, such as the restoration of Balhae as part of Korean history, and the limiting of the significance of Silla's unification. The term Unified Silla and Balhae was thus introduced in various introductions and textbooks.

The term Unified Silla and Balhae and the idea of limited unification soon faced criticism. In the 1980s, it was pointed out that the idea of the coexistence of Unified Silla and Balhae was awkward, and that the thesis of Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms should be refuted for the restoration of the entire history of Korea, including Balhae⁹ (Kim Y. 1989, 195–223). As a result, the emphasis on the seventh-century war shifted from being a Silla-centered unification war in Korea to being an international war in East Asia. Furthermore, after reviewing the thesis of Silla's unification of the three kingdoms, which had long been established, some critics claimed that it was not contemporaries' understanding, but a later generation's assessment. They even suggested that Silla unified nothing but Baekje. It did not mean that they failed to recognize

⁹ The idea of "limited unification" indicates that Silla did not occupy all of the previous Goguryeo territory.

the historical contributions of the thesis of unification of the Three Kingdoms to the historical study of national formation, nor did they ignore the national question that has confronted modern Korean historiography since modern times. However, they still argued for the adoption of the North–South States thesis as the best way to reconstitute Korean history in its entirety. Later, China’s so-called Northeast Project (東北工程) served as momentum for the further development of this view. Since the 2000s, China’s promotion of the “unified multi-ethnic Chinese nation” thesis has led to attempts to incorporate the histories of Goguryeo and Balhae into Chinese history. Korean historians responded by consolidating a holistic view of Korean history that included Goguryeo and Balhae. For this reason, the thesis of North–South States, rather than the thesis of the unification of the Three Kingdoms, was chosen for further study. Still, it is an ongoing debate on whether to take the outcome of the seventh-century war as the unification of Korea and the formation of the nation (Noh 2009), or as the formation of the North–South States Period as a step towards the restoration of Korean history in its entirety (Kim Y. 2012).¹⁰

Two Debates

We have identified how this war has been evaluated and what it has been called across different periods. Let us discuss next how it should be evaluated and what name should be used. This requires a brief review of the previous discussions, which have converged on two major debates. The first is whether the outcome of the seventh-century war can actually be considered the unification of Korea’s Three Kingdoms. There are two arguments: the first is that Silla indeed unified the Three Kingdoms of Korea (Noh 2011, 329–345; Kim 2014, 25–81), and the other is that Silla

¹⁰ Recent discussions on this subject are summarized in the series of articles under the title “Samguktongil gwa Tongil Silla ui chaechomyeong” (Reexamination of the Unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea and Unified Silla) in *Yeoksabipyong* issues published in 2019 and 2020.

only incorporated Baekje (Kim 2010, 293–327; Kim 2016, 1–38). The main disagreement between them is over the location of the two territories that Silla occupied after the war: namely, “the Baekje territory south of Pyongyang” (平壤已南百濟土地), which appeared in the records of the postwar negotiations between Tang China and Silla, or “Goguryeo Namgyeong” (高句麗南境, the southern border of Goguryeo), where Silla is said to have stationed military bases (駐軍). Regarding these territories, the first argument is that Silla achieved the unification of Korea by securing the former territory of Goguryeo through military conquest. In contrast, the second argument is that the two recorded territories were not part of Goguryeo and, therefore, Silla’s occupation did not extend beyond Baekje. It is a corollary that this latter argument supports the thesis of North–South States.

The second major debate is about the question of when the perception of Samhan Unification emerged. As discussed earlier, the term Samhan Unification reflected Silla’s contemporary perception of the seventh-century war’s outcome (Kim 2018, 241–276; Kim 2019, 365–399). Yoon Kyeong-jin further identified that this perception first appeared in the late ninth century (Yoon 2019a, 12–39; Yoon 2019b, 265–307). The main focus is placed on the historical records where the term Samhan Unification appeared, namely, “Kim Yu-sin Haengrok” (金庾信行錄, Chronicle of Kim Yu-sin’s Sayings and Doings) and the Uncheon-dong Silla Stele. There are two interpretations of these records. The first interpretation identifies the period of these two sources as the seventh century, and that at this time, the Silla royal family began using the term Samhan Unification to reinforce its authority. The second interpretation on the other hand, identifies the period of the two sources as the ninth century and understands the use of the term as a logic to cope with social division and national crisis, such as the Rebellion of Kim Heon-chang (金憲昌). This latter interpretation indicates that it was not the seventh-century war but the tenth-century war in the Later Three Kingdoms period that led to the first unification in Korean history. It also means that Goryeo, not Silla, was the groundbreaking moment in the national history. In summary, whereas the first argument embraces the holistic perspective of Korean

history by stressing the inclusion of Balhae, the second argument identifies the period of national formation not as Silla but as Goryeo. It should also be noted that the latter's version of the Samhan Unification thesis once again had the effect of excluding Balhae, the successor of Goguryeo, and thus the wholeness of its Korean history is compromised.

Beyond Nation and Korean History

We have seen that the seventh-century war has been called different names from its end to the present day, depending on the demands of each epoch in Korean history. In brief, from the Silla Kingdom to the Joseon Dynasty, it was known as the Unification War of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, reflecting the historical orthodoxy of Silla. Since the nineteenth century, with the advent of Qing China and the rise of Korean territorial consciousness over the northern region, the war's previous name, which had excluded Balhae from Korean history, was no longer valid. Later, in modern times, the result of the war was renamed yet again as the unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, by colonialist historians who supported Japanese imperialism. In a critical response, Korean nationalist historians reincorporated Balhae into Korean history, giving new significance to the unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea as a period of national formation. In the meantime, the term Unified Silla and Balhae became a ground for two contesting theses: one is the thesis of Silla's unification of Korea that emphasizes this national historical formative moment, and the other is the thesis of North-South States that calls for the restoration of the wholeness of Korean history. The conflict between the two theses is likely to continue because both are logical and meet some of the demands of our society.

However, it has become clear that the term of Unification of the Three Kingdoms is no longer unquestionable. The validity of this term, for which modern Korean historiography has given a renewal, is being questioned again. At the same time, it is proposed that the thesis of North-South States, built upon the premise that Balhae is part of Korean

history, also needs to be re-examined. The proposal is a response to the demand of the time for a new community that goes beyond modern concepts of nation and nation-states. In fact, the thesis of Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms and the thesis of North-South States share a nationalist perspective on Korean history, which takes the nation as its primary subject. (Lee Jae-hwan 2019, 40-65) However, we need a discussion about how the inclusion of Balhae in Korean history is necessary to conceive of such a new East Asian community. In the same vein, we need to discuss whether the restoration of the nation's past from the beginning of human history is necessary, given that the nation itself is a relatively modern concept.

Certain aspects are missing from nation-centered Korean history. First, writing of Korean history based on the nation naturally assumes a center, which constitutes the present nation of ours, and a periphery, which is outside us. This story of center and periphery tends to marginalize the histories of the periphery, such as Buyeo (夫餘), Okjeo (沃沮), Eumnu (挹婁), Malgal (靺鞨), Dongye (東濊), and Gaya (伽倻). Second, the exclusive focus on Korean history may lead to overlooking its connections to the histories of other East Asian countries. For example, historians have focused on whether the result of the seventh-century war was the unification of the Three Kingdoms or the formation of North-South States, while they have overlooked the social changes that the same war brought to East Asian countries. This narrow vision stems from the limitations inherent in the concept of the nation and its exclusive focus on Korean history. If the idea of an East Asian community requires a different history of Korea that goes beyond the paradigm of center and periphery, domination and subordination, and nation-based Korean history, then the seventh-century war needs a completely different name. History is an interpretation, indeed. Bearing this in mind, this article seeks a new meaning of the seventh-century war, opening up new possibilities beyond those relevant only to Korean history.

Revisiting Mid-to-Late Seventh-Century East Asia

The seventh century marked a watershed in East Asian history. The Turk/Göktürks (突厥), established as an empire in the Eurasian steppe region in the mid-sixth century, were divided into the Eastern Turkic Khaganate (東突厥) and the Western Turkic Khaganate (西突厥) in the seventh century. At this time, the Sui (隋) and Tang Dynasties were established in mainland China, subjugating the Turk/Göktürks and Turkistan in the west, as well as conquering Goguryeo and Baekje in the east. In the late seventh century, with the revival of the Turk/Göktürks in the Mongolian steppes, the Tang Dynasty began to shrink. In the midst of conflict between Tang China and the Turk/Göktürks, Balhae was founded in the east, while Silla fought against Tang's dominance. Additionally, during this time, the Taika Reforms (大化の改新) and the Jinshin War (壬申の乱) occurred in Japan. As in the international relations between Korea, China, and Japan in the early twentieth century, each of these seventh-century events happened in the context of an interconnected East Asia (or, even further, Eurasia). Each country's situation and conditions were different under these international circumstances, but when change occurred, it always centered around hostile relations between neighboring states, such as those between Turk/Göktürks, Goguryeo and Sui-Tang. (Kim H. 1989, 289-294) Just as the context of the Cold War should be considered when examining the Korean War, Sui-Tang's international strategy offers a crucial perspective for reevaluating the seventh-century war and moving beyond the victor's perspective, in this case, Silla. Likewise, the consequences of the war should be viewed not in terms of the unification of the Three Kingdoms or of the North-South States, but in terms of the changes across East Asian countries.

The Sui dynasty, which overcame the period of division during the time of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties (魏晉南北朝) and achieved the unification of China, invaded neighboring states several times to establish legitimacy internally and a China-centered international order externally. The Tang Dynasty, which followed the Sui dynasty and was founded in 618, employed the same East Asian strategy as its

predecessor. Emperor Taizong(太宗) of Tang pacified the public sentiment scattered by the fall of the Sui dynasty and conquered the Eastern Turkic Khaganate of Mobei (幕北) in 630 ("Tujuezhuan" (突厥傳) in Old Book of Tang (Jiutangshu 舊唐書) Vol. 194-1), Tuyuhun (吐谷渾) of Xiyu (西域) in 635, and Gaochang (高昌) in 640. This means that in the first half of the seventh century, the Tang Dynasty subjugated the territory west of China, where the Turk/Göktürks had ruled. By the mid-to-late seventh century, Tang's remaining obstacle in establishing a China-centered international order was in the east, namely, Goguryeo.

Goguryeo, on the other hand, maintained a moderate international policy in the early years of the Tang Dynasty, unlike its previous hardline approach during the King Yeongyang (嬰陽王) period against the Sui dynasty. Then, in September or October of 642, massive bloodshed broke out in Pyongyang (平壤), with the appearance of Yeon Gae-so-mun (淵蓋蘇文). King Yeongnyu (營留王) was assassinated, and 180 noblewomen were killed. Yeon Gae-so-mun installed the king's young nephew as the new king, made himself Mangniji (莫離支, the prime minister of Goguryeo), and took control of the state. His ascent to power also entailed the purge of the factions that had adopted a moderate stance towards China. For the stability of his new regime, Yeon Gae-so-mun turned to a hardline policy against the Tang Dynasty.

Taizong was waiting for the right moment to attack Goguryeo. He performed condolence rituals (弔祭) for the murdered Goguryeo King Yeongnyu, which helped him consolidate his position. The time had come when Silla, facing a national crisis from the attacks from Goguryeo and Baekje, asked for salvation. At last, Taizong declared war against Goguryeo in 645: "My intention to conquer Goguryeo is to wash the shame of the Chinese sons and to take revenge on the Goguryeo military. In addition, China has pacified all four corners of the world, but Goguryeo has not yet been pacified. Therefore, I am trying to take Goguryeo with the power of scholars and officials (士大夫) while I am still young." Note that in this declaration, the bilateral relationship between the two countries left little room for Silla to intervene.

At this point, it is necessary to mention briefly the beginning of the

seventh-century war. Previously, the alliance between Silla and Tang in the 640s was largely regarded as the beginning of the war. This means that the nature of the war was an East Asian international war, and its characteristics are particularly evident in the case of the Eastern Expeditions of China (Sui and Tang) and in the intense rivalry between Three Kingdoms. However, it is worthwhile to note that Goguryeo's attack on Silla (603) under Sui's pressure on Goguryeo can be seen as the starting point for the war and the determinant of its nature. This interpretation can offer a critique of the existing account, which provides only a limited explanation and focuses solely on the perspective of a single state, the Silla Kingdom. Still, it is true that the plan for the conquest of Goguryeo by Taizong of the Tang Dynasty in 645 and the alliance between Silla and Tang in 648 must have been a significant turning point in the war.

In 645, Taizong mobilized more than 200,000 army and naval forces for the attack on Goguryeo. To defend itself, Goguryeo mobilized 150,000 troops. This scale of the military forces of the two states involved in the war is significant. The drafting of hundreds of thousands of troops would have been impossible with Tang's existing professional military system. To transform peasants into the Tang's standing army, the Binghu system (兵戶制) was abolished, and the Fubing system (府兵制) was adopted. Goguryeo was no different. Before the war, both countries mobilized a large number of peasants to build a large-scale military force. This military reorganization had organic connections to every aspect of the society. To maintain and operate a large military force, enormous funding was needed, and thus, stable tax collection was required. In other words, it is possible to infer that if tax collection must have been made stable enough to fund a massive army, the bureaucracy responsible for tax collection must also have been made stable. For the large-scale military mobilization, both the Tang Dynasty and Goguryeo must have had established state bureaucracies based on the Yulryeong (律令) legal system. Going a little further, it could be considered that the Tang and Goguryeo's reinforced centralization, including a large military force and enormous funding, may have also triggered the centralization of other societies, such as Baekje, Silla, and Japan. It was in this context that condi-

tions for an international war were shaped for East Asian countries in the seventh century. Therefore, Yeon Gae-so-mun's seizure of power in 642 in Goguryeo, King Uija's (義慈王) self-coup in the same year in Baekje, the seizure of power by Kim Chun-chu (金春秋) in 647 in Silla, and the Taika Reform in the late 640s in Japan are not events independent from each other but a chain reaction.

The Tang Dynasty had to revise its short-term occupation strategy after the failure of the offensive at Ansi Fortress (安市城) during its invasion of Goguryeo. In 659, King Taejong Muyeol (太宗武烈王) of Silla, faced with internal and external crises due to frequent attacks by Baekje, requested its Chinese alliance to attack Baekje. Tang also needed a new strategy after the Liaodong attack failed due to a lack of support. This strategy involved a direct attack on Pyongyang after securing Baekje as the rear base. Baekje Kingdom fell in 660 when the attacking forces led by Su Dingfang (蘇定方) and Liu Boying (劉伯英), in association with the Silla army, took over Sabi Castle (泗泚城). Baekje's diplomacy thoroughly failed in the Tang-centered international order. However, immediately after Baekje's fall, in 662, Tang attacked Goguryeo but was defeated by the superior command of Yeon Gae-so-mun. After all, Tang's direct-attack strategy on Pyongyang ended in failure as well. From the Tang's point of view, the fall of Baekje was nothing more than securing an outpost for the direct attack on Pyongyang, and the relationship between the Tang and Silla had to change after the fall of Baekje.

The war between Goguryeo and Tang came to a halt from 662, when the Pyongyang attack failed, to 666, when Tang resumed its attack. This sudden respite was unusual in light of the fierce battles in the preceding years. When the Baekje Restoration Movement arose, Tang considered the withdrawal of the military stationed there under the command of Liu Renyuan (劉仁願), which Liu Rengui (劉仁軌) opposed because of Baekje's strategic value for the conquest of Goguryeo. In 663, the Silla-Tang forces defeated Japanese naval forces at Baekgang (白江), the lower reaches of the Geum River (錦江), and captured Juryu Castle (周留城) in Hansan (韓山), suppressing the Baekje Restoration Movement. After the defeat in the Battle of Baekgang, Yamato Japan (大和), which had at-

tempted to consolidate power by raising military tensions, encountered the culmination of internal contradictions that led to a civil war known as the Jinshin War. In the meantime, Tang appointed Buyeo Yung (扶餘隆) to Ungjin Dodok (熊津都督, Commander of Ungjin) and gained control over the previous territory of Baekje by arranging the Chwirisan league (就利山會盟) with Silla King Munmu in 665.

In 664, Yeon Gae-so-mun disappeared from history. After the death of this anti-Tang Goguryeo statesman, the political battle over China policy led to the internal conflict among his children. In 666, his eldest son, Yeon Nam-saeng (淵男生), went into exile in Tang China, and his brother Yeon Jeong-to (淵淨土) surrendered to Silla. After establishing the official policy for the former territory of Baekje, Tang's interest naturally turned to Goguryeo again. Tang organized the last Goguryeo attack. The attack, which began in 667, ended with the fall of Pyongyang in 668, and Goguryeo was destroyed.

Silla could not avoid war with Tang China, which now occupied the former territory of Baekje. Although taking over this territory was not Tang's original goal, there was no reason to give Silla the territory that it had secured for the conquest of Goguryeo. Silla made efforts to improve relations with Wae (倭, Japan), and at the same time supported the former Goguryeo people's anti-Tang movement. By 671, King Munmu of Silla was able to take control over the old territory of Baekje by establishing Soburi-ju (所夫里州) in the Sabi Castle and appointing Jinwang (眞王) to Dodok (都督). In 674, after suppressing the former Goguryeo people's anti-Chinese movement, Tang China commenced its attack on Silla. Silla and Tang had no choice but to contend for final victory. After the defeat of its 200,000 troops led by Li Jinxing (李謹行) in the Battle of Maeso (買肖城戰鬪) in 675, Tang withdrew from the Protectorate General to Pacify the East (安東都護府) to Liaodong Castle (遼東城) in 676. The war between Silla and Tang thus came to an end. However, considering that this seventh-century war originated from Sui and Tang China's willingness to occupy and subjugate Goguryeo, we can say that it did not end until this willingness disappeared after the founding of Balhae in the former territory of Goguryeo by Goguryeo emigrants in 698.

A New Attempt at Naming the War

As we have seen, the Tang strategy linked the countries involved in the East Asian war of the seventh century. Considering the possibility of revisiting seventh-century East Asia, there have been two recent proposals to change the name of the war: the Northeast Asian War in the Mid-to-Late Seventh Century (Lee Jae-hwan 2019, 62) or the Manchuria-Korean War in the Seventh Century (Yeo 2020, 306). However, both proposals have their own shortcomings.

There are two issues with the first proposal of the Northeast Asian War in the Mid-to-Late Seventh Century. First, while the word "North-east Asia" refers to all of the countries that participated in the war, namely, Tang, Goguryeo, Silla, Baekje, Wae, Malgal, and Kitan (契丹), it does not include Turk/Göktürks, Xueyantuo (薛延陀), and Tubo (吐蕃), which also influenced the war. In addition, the term does not specify the subject and object of the war, thus making its meaning ambiguous. Accordingly, some scholars have pointed out that the broader concept of "Eastern Eurasia" seems more appropriate, but the war's subject remains ambiguous even with this change (Lee 2020, 229). The second issue is that this term cannot distinguish Tang China's conflicts with the Turk/Göktürks and with Tuyuhun and Gaochang. The latter conflict was not part of the seventh-century war, but the term unwittingly includes it because of the following facts: the latter conflict began in the 620s as a derivative of the seventh-century war, both the years of 634, when Tang subjugated Tuyuhun, and 639, when Gaochang was destroyed, fall into the temporal range of the mid-seventh century, and these two states also fall into the spatial range of Northeast Asia.

There are also two issues with the second proposal of the Manchurian-Korean War in the Seventh Century. First, again, the name does not make clear the subject of the war. Without identifying the leading force of the war, which was Tang China, this term only emphasizes the geographical area of the war that Manchuria-Korea encompasses. Second, it is likely that this name would not be distinguished from the Manseon View of History and would unwittingly serve the claims of Japanese co-

lonialist historians. To remind, the advocates of the Manseon View of History attempted to write a history in which Manchuria is separated from China and the Korean peninsula was subordinated to Manchuria, with the goal of reconfiguring Manseon (Manchuria–Korea) as a single historical world.

Instead, we need a name that satisfies three conditions. First, the name must reveal the nature of the seventh-century war as a Tang-led international war. Second, it must encompass the entire time and space that influenced the war. Third, the name must distinguish this war from those that came before it. As a term that meets these conditions, this article proposes ‘The Second East Asian War of the Seventh Century’ as the new name of the seventh-century war. According to this nomenclature, the first East Asian war would be the Tang’s war against the Turk/Göktürks, Tuyuhu, and Gaochang, which occurred in accordance with its western strategy. Thus, the proposed name distinguishes it from the previous war, and at the same time, it reveals the characteristics of the war as an East Asian international conflict of the seventh century, with Tang and Goguryeo as its two pivotal forces.

Having proposed the new term, this present article acknowledges the need to clarify the meaning of “East Asia.” Let us undertake this task by discussing Nishijima Sadao’s East Asian World theory (Nishijima 1962; Nishijima 1970), which has been criticized in three ways: first, it has been pointed out that the theory’s spatial coverage is too narrow, and second, the time span it examines is too short, and third, since the theory focuses only on China and its relationship with the surrounding powers, it makes the relationship and subjecthood within these surrounding powers difficult to evaluate.

Alternatively, the Eastern Eurasia theory has recently appeared in Japanese academic circles (Suganuma 2014, 4; Hirose 2018, 4). The main point of change is that “Eastern Eurasia” replaces “East Asia,” thereby expanding the term’s meaning to encompass the steppe region of Central Asia, which was closely linked to China, as well as nomadic societies of northwestern China. This recounting of the war not only presents the nomadic powers of northwest China, such as the Turk/Göktürks

and Xueyantuo, as one of the main actors in the war, but also considers the relationships among neighboring powers, including Goguryeo and Xueyantao, as well as Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla.

It is still questionable whether the term "Eastern Eurasia" is appropriate as an alternative name for two reasons. First, different researchers apply different criteria to define the area referred to by the term "Eastern Eurasia." Generally speaking, researchers agree to include the steppe zone of Central Asia, but there is still disagreement as to how far its western limit should extend and whether the southern waters should be included. Second, even if the meaning of "Eastern Eurasia" covers interlocking international orders, it has not yet been established whether the term can actually operate as a signifier for a regional "community" or "world."

True, "East Asia" is a term with its own limitations. While acknowledging the limitations, this article proposes using the term as the name of the seventh-century war. Changes in East Asian countries during the war were not trivial. Silla, Balhae, and Japan strengthened their centralized state systems by adopting the Tang's precedent immediately after the war. The Tang-centered East Asian network expanded further due to the development of traffic routes and the dissemination of geographic information during the war. It should also not be overlooked that increased agricultural productivity in each state was the internal motivation for these changes. (Lee Jeong-bin 2019, 66–86) In other words, the background of the war was each country's strengthening of state centralization based on socioeconomic development, resulting in the establishment of the Tang-centered international order and the East Asian state system. Although contemporaries of Silla evaluated the war as the unification of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, if this name is no longer valid today, we perhaps do not need to use it. If the name and significance of this war are important to us, I propose that it be reassessed as the start of the interconnected East Asian community, and that the history of East Asia as a new community be explored in future research.

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