



Some Reflections on this Special Issue about Koguryŏ's Foreign Relations

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This volume, the first edition of the *Journal of Northeast Asian History*, derives from a conference titled “Koguryŏ and Its Neighbors: International Relations in Early Northeast Asia” which convened in Los Angeles in February 2007 as a joint project of the Northeast Asian History Foundation and the UCLA Center for Korean Studies in Los Angeles. Although we experienced a number of the typical difficulties – and a few not-so-typical ones – that often come with holding such a conference, it seemed to us that the papers submitted at the conference deserve publication because they represent high quality, and because together they significantly contribute to scholarship in a number of important areas.

Given the recent controversy regarding the historical “ownership” of Koguryŏ, these papers all focusing on the interactions between Koguryŏ and the various other states and ethnic groups in Northeast Asia, obviously present scholarship both timely and useful in helping to clarify the nature of Koguryŏ history and the position that Koguryŏ occupied in the larger history of Northeast Asia. That Koguryŏ very

much acted independently as an entity that continuously readjusted its stance toward various neighbors, including states in China, due to changing circumstances in interstate and inter-ethnic relations in East and Northeast Asia, emerges as a theme important to all of these papers.

I believe that another great value of this volume is its contribution to the study of early Northeast Asia in the English language. Going back some decades ago, there was relative abundance of English-language scholarship focusing on early China, not only on the classical era, but also on the Han dynasty, the Interregnum of the third through sixth centuries, and the Sui-Tang era. Important, if less copious, scholarship also developed on early Japan. In recent years, however, scholarly fashion shifted the focus of research to later times, and precious little work has appeared on China and Japan for the time frame covered in this edition. In the case of Korea, although historians in the English-speaking world began to research Korean history in the 1960s, there has been almost no scholarship in English for the pre-Goryeo (pre-Koryŏ) period except for a handful of studies on archaeology and two or three articles dealing with specific aspects of the early Korean experience. Thus this volume makes available in English for the first time a collection of articles dealing in depth with a specific theme in ancient Korean history.

If the general study of early Northeast Asia has been largely neglected in the past forty-some years, how much more so the study of interstate and inter-ethnic relations in the region? Although recent years have seen a spate of important studies dealing with interactions between the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups (most notably the Manchus) during the late imperial and early modern eras, and even some significant work on international and inter-ethnic relations throughout most of East Asia in the twentieth century, almost nothing has appeared in print on early interstate relations. The articles in this collection raise some crucial issues and shed significant light on the nature of interactions among various actors in Northeast Asia during the final centuries B.C.E. and the first seven centuries of the current era. Significantly, the articles included

here not only help to fill a major gap in our scholarship, but also – as the recent controversy over Koguryō shows – they address issues of ancient history that remain very much alive in relation to questions of national identity and which can pose significant challenges to the conduct of international relations in Northeast Asia today.

Also, I would like to note that these papers, with their focus on the area in and around the Korean Peninsula, provide extremely important insights and perspectives. To the extent that English-language scholarship has focused on East or Northeast Asia as a whole, it has tended to do so from standpoints that privilege China and/or Japan. That is somewhat understandable, given the relative size and importance of those two countries, but it has left us with an incomplete and skewed understanding of the region, especially with regard to the interactions among its various states and peoples. As these papers demonstrate, the entire region formed a closely interconnected series of systems in which the area around and in the Korean Peninsula was a key linchpin. The Korea-centered perspectives that these papers offer should go far to give us a much fuller and more rounded understanding of how early Northeast Asia developed – not as a collection of individual states and ethnic groups, but as an integrated whole. It is my hope that this volume will stimulate scholars to think about Northeast Asia in new ways and that it will inspire a new generation of historians to develop interests in early Northeast Asian history.

Next, I would like to note that we are unable to publish two other important papers that were given at the conference. One, by Professor Nancy Steinhardt of the University of Pennsylvania, examines links between Koguryō and Central Asia through artifacts of material culture; unfortunately, Professor Nancy Steinhardt had already published much of this material in another venue, and so we are unable to include her valuable findings here. The other, by Professor Yingzi Xu of Roanoke College, presents a very useful and stimulating study of relations between China and Koguryō that focused primarily on the issues

surrounding China's Northeast Project; although Professor Yingzi Xu offers a significant contribution to our understanding of the current situation, her conference paper falls beyond the temporal scope of this volume.

Finally, I would like to thank the Northeast Asian History Foundation for funding the conference, for doing so much of the work in preparing for the conference, and for publishing this collection of papers in the *Journal of Northeast Asian History*. I would also like to express my apologies for any delays in the publication of the *Journal's* inaugural edition due to my lack of diligence and organizational skills.