


**Rescuing a Stone from Nationalism:  
A Fresh Perspective on the King  
Kwanggaet'ŏ Stele of Koguryŏ**

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## **Rescuing a Stone from Nationalism: A Fresh Perspective on the King Kwanggaet'ŏ Stele of Koguryŏ**

This paper aims at lifting from the face of King Kwanggaet'ŏ stele the veil of colonialist and nationalist interpretations which have long concealed its real character. It suggests that the Japanese historiography on the stele during the Meiji era and the subsequent period of colonial occupation of Korea was informed by the contemporary political needs of Japan. The Korean interpretations of the stele also failed to uphold dispassionate objectivity. The recent Chinese studies on Koguryŏ are equally tendentious. The paper emphasizes the need to rescue the stele from these competing nationalist narratives and attempts to interpret it from a fresh perspective by contextualizing it within the broad pan-Asiatic framework. The paper is based on the hypothesis that the main emphasis of the stele is the articulation of a new notion of sacred kingship, transmitted through the traditions of the silk-road Buddhism.

## Rescuing a Stone from Nationalism: A Fresh Perspective on the King Kwanggaet'o Stele of Koguryō

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### Introduction

**K**wanggaet'o stele 廣開土王碑, commemorating the divine genealogy and military conquests of King Kwanggaet'o (r. 391-412) of Koguryō 高句麗, one of the three early Korean states, was set up in 414 by his son King Changsu at Ji'an 集安, currently in the Jilin province of China. It lay concealed in obscurity until the late nineteenth century when the Qing dynasty installed administrative institutions to reclaim this barren land into the fold of its empire, and local residents discovered this inscription of monumental historical importance. Soon after it was brought to light, the stele was cleared of the moss that had accumulated for about 1500 years, and several rubbings were made by interested scholars from China and Japan. But as studies of those rubbings commenced, it acquired a different kind of outgrowth. It gathered thick ideological encrustation, derived primarily from nationalist impulses.

We need to remind ourselves that nationalism, the most dominant ideological and political movement in the twentieth century, is a process of "imagining" a community in terms of ethno-symbolism or "myth-symbol complex," as has been noted by Anthony Smith. Smith defines "myth-sym-

bol complex” as real or imagined historical memories and myths of cultural and ideological homogeneity (Smith 1986, 15).<sup>1</sup> This myth of “ethnie” or shared cultural and historical experience forges a sense of collective identity amongst people and enables them to differentiate themselves from the members of other sovereign polities. This idea resonates in the much-acclaimed work of Prasenjit Duara when he demonstrates in the Chinese context how the representations of the past seek to shape the present (1996, 27). In his most recent work he has developed this concept further and demonstrated that in China and Japan history was inextricably integrated within the nationalist projects and was used as a tool to forge statehood and cohesive identity and further, to justify claims of sovereignty over frontier areas (Duara 2003).

In this paper I point out that the interpretations of King Kwanggaet'o stele lay frozen for over a century under the blizzard of mutually competing narratives of nationalism, and that the text needs to be examined afresh as a product of the contemporary notion of kingship and the Sino-Indian tradition of epigraphy. The first section of this paper is, therefore, devoted to the investigation of nationalist underpinnings of its interpretations. In the second part of this paper I emphasize the need to exorcise the stele of nationalist spirit and contextualize it within the broad political and ideological pattern so as to correctly decode its cultural and ideological meaning and symbolism. For a proper understanding of the text it is indeed important to examine four major themes: the cultural and religious values of the Koguryŏ royalty; the style or formulaic genre of writing stone inscriptions in the non-Han states of North China, with which Koguryŏ held extensive interaction in fourth and fifth centuries; the inherent limitations of the Sinocentric world order in the pre-Tang period; and the process of state-formation in the contemporary state of Yamato on the Japanese archipelago.

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<sup>1</sup> John Duncan has used the insight of Smith to demonstrate the ethno-symbolic navel of Korean nationalism, although it needs to be mentioned that he adopts a mediating position between primordialists and modernists in his analysis of the rise of modern Korean nationalism (Duncan, 1998, 198-221).

## Early Japanese Interpretations

Sakawa Kageaki, an officer in the Japanese army and an intelligence agent, was the first foreigner in China to make a rubbing of the stele and bring it to the General Staff Office in Japan in 1884 or 1885 (Sakawa 1974; Wang 王建群 1984, 1-41; Pak Chongtae 1988, 4-6). Yokoi Tadanao 横井忠直 who taught at the Military Academy of Japan studied the text and published his findings in a series of five articles in the journal *Kaiyoroku* 會餘錄 in 1889. In the subsequent years various other Japanese scholars, including Kan Masatomo 菅正友 (1891), Naka Michiyo 那珂通世 (1893), Miyake Yonekichi 三宅米吉 (1898) wrote on the subject. Later such eminent Japanese scholars of Oriental studies as Torii Ryuzo 鳥居龍藏, Sekino Tei 關野貞, Imanishi Ryu 今西龍, Ikeuchi Hiroshi 池内宏 and Umehara Matsuji 梅原末治 visited the site of the stele and wrote on the subject (Pak Chongtae 1988, 80-116; Takeda Yukio 武田幸男 1989a, 1-14, 1989b, 57-90; Sō Yōngsu 1995, 149-183; Suzuki 1996, 35-53; Yi Sōngsi 2001, 35-79).

These early Japanese historians of Korea combined their extensive training in Kosogaku (Korean “Kojūng hak” or “an empirical and inductive methodology of textual study” (Shuzo, 1983), with tools of Western historical research. Their studies on Korea were indubitably significant as a methodological breakthrough; they were, nonetheless, unable to uphold dispassionate objectivity, crucial to sound historical scholarship. Meiji Japan's historical practice was enmeshed with the contemporary political imperatives of Japan, involving a binary opposition in which Japan as “self” or “privileged signifier” wielded power, and the role of Korea, the “other,” was mostly to authenticate Japanese superiority over Korean backwardness.<sup>2</sup> The political implication of the Orientalist myths perpetuated by Japanese historians was obvious—Korea could not shape its own destiny, and Japan as a “superior” nation had to bring “backward” Korea under its control and lead

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2 In this context the remarks of Bruce Cumings are worthy of note; Cumings wrote that with the rise of modern Japan in the Meiji era and relative backwardness of Korea which deterred it from constructing its own past, Korea was divested of its significance as an actor in history in the Western imagination. (Bruce Cumings. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. 20.) Edward Said has highlighted the same image of contrast in his study of Europe vis-à-vis Asia (1972, 2).

it forward on the path of enlightenment and modernization.

The uncritical acceptance of the inscription by Japanese historians needs to be understood within this broad historical context of Korea-Japan relations. Although the translation of the controversial part of the stele which deals with relations between Wa and the early Korean Kingdoms appears to be faithful to the original text,<sup>3</sup> the problem lay primarily in the enthusiastic appropriation of the text by Japanese scholars in order to bolster fictitious, or at best, semi-fictitious account of the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀.

It is also worthy of note that the Japanese state during the Meiji era was engaged in constructing and inventing the traditions of "emperor system ideology," and through it attempting to create a modern nation-state (Gluck 1985, 17-20; Kim Yŏngdŏk 1991, 36-40; Fujitani 1995, 9-18; Vlastos 1998, 10-16). During the period the intellectual lineage of Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長, the high-priest of the Kokugaku School (Burns 2003), was reinforced, and *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* 古事記-based imperialist myths became firmly established as an articulation of Japan's historical consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Overwhelmed with a nostalgia fixated on the accounts of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, (i.e. Silla was conquered by Empress Jingu and the southern Korean kingdom of Kaya served as Japan's colonial outpost), the Japanese cried out for an action re-play, for a revival of their so-called lost imperialist glory beyond the border. The following extract from Yoshida Shoin 吉田松陰 of the late Tokugawa period, a preeminent ideologue of the Meiji restoration, may be cited as a typical illustration of the spirit of Japan's expansive nationalism:

Japan should upbraid Korea for her long negligence in the observation of her duties towards Japan, and have her send tribute-bearing envoys, and Japan should also instruct Korea to give hostages to Japan for her good behavior, as

<sup>3</sup> The Japanese translation of the passage in question is more or less as follows: Paekche and Silla were subject peoples (of Koguryo) from antiquity, and from that time on have offered tribute. But in the year Sinmoy ( 391) the Wa sailed across the sea and defeated Paekche ... Silla, making them their subjects. So in the sixth year the king personally led a war fleet to punish and overthrow that "remnant country," i.e., Paekche.

<sup>4</sup> Validation of Japan's early historical texts and restoration of the imperial system provided ideological and institutional rationale for the rise of "Seikanron," or Conquer Korea Debate which has been magisterially discussed by several authors, the most recent being Peter Duus (1995, 31-43).

she did during the glorious imperial period of ancient Japan (Kuno 1937, 352-353).

An echo of similar sentiments can be heard in a number of publications of the times.<sup>5</sup> The *Nihon shoki*-based history of the subjugation of Paekche and Mimana's status as Yamato's colonial outpost in ancient times by the Yamato rulers was now regarded as a historical orthodoxy, corroborated by this archaeological monument. The pioneering Japanese scholars of oriental history at the newly-founded department of history of the Imperial University of Tokyo gave ideological rationale to the imperialist outcry for invasion of Korea (Mishina and Murakami 1965, 83-110). Even Shiratori Kurakichi 白鳥庫吉, a brilliant professor of oriental history at the Imperial University referred to the stele, as has been documented by Hyung-il Pai in her recent study, as the earliest monument commemorating Japanese colonization on the continent 1500 year earlier. Shiratori led an energetic campaign to move the stele to Japan (Pai 2000, 27), and was so passionate in his trust of its historical accuracy that during the Russo Japanese war of 1905 he stated that the inscription echoed contemporary sentiments, in that it provided an indubitable evidence of Japan's success in realizing its imperialist ambition in the ancient past. To quote him, "We can not but win, because it had been so demonstrated (in wars) in the ancient past" (Farris 1998, 61).

It is obvious that the historical practice in Meiji Japan developed illicit liaison with the contemporary political imperatives of Japan. Some Japanese historians, including Naka Michiyo and Tsuda Sokichi, questioned the credibility of *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*, but were steadfast, nonetheless, in their conclusion that the southern part of Korean peninsula served as a colonial outpost of Japan for a couple of centuries (Farris 1998, 60~61). Works on the King Kwanggaet'o stele, published in the post-war Japan more or less followed the lead of these scholars. It is heartening to note, however, that some recent works on Korea-Japan relations have distanced themselves and even openly repudiated these theories (Hatada 1979, 17; Kubo 久保井規夫 1988, 16-18)

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5A novel entitled *Kajin no Kigu* (Strange Encounters of Elegant Females), quoted in G.B.Sansomm's work (1950, p. 414) articulates the same view and vision of Korea. Two popular works of Okakura Kakuzo (1903, 1905) may also be cited as fine illustrations of this point.

## Chinese Interpretations

Chinese interpretations of early Korea are also inextricably linked with the official nationalism of the Communist Party of China. Chinese nationalism during the Mao Era, from 1949 to the 1970's, demonstrated two major characteristics: it was focused on anti-imperialism and was centered on the Han race. Education diffused this concept of nationhood by re-inventing the history of China as having originated from the Han people of the North and emphasizing the need to absorb the national minorities. Although the Han race inhabited the Yellow River crossroads, where assimilation of other peoples was indisputable, it was declared that the Han race was the sole origin of the People's Republic of China (Friedman 1994, 70-71). It is apparent that the state "manipulated the content of nationalism" to meet the contemporary political needs of the government (Unger 1996, xv). The Cultural Revolution was the most virulent and eloquent expression of Maoist nationalism. Apparently history of the Korean people was of little interest to China during this period.

The Maoist world view of superior Han race, however, failed to create a collective identity amongst Chinese people, because the national minorities were culturally alienated and could not share the meaning and exclusive historical experience of the privileged Han race. In the post-Mao era when China initiated the policies of reform and liberalization, a new myth-symbol complex was successfully created to forge and mobilize collective national identity. This was achieved through the reconstruction of a new nationalist narrative of multiethnic state which subverted and gradually replaced the previous Maoist one. In the 1990's archaeological and anthropological evidence was produced to show that the Chinese civilization originated from a mutual amalgamation of several sources. Museums were reorganized and rebuilt to persuade the public of multivalent national origins other than the monolithic one centered on the Northern Han People (Friedman 1994, 70-71). It is also remarkable that when South China emerged as a locomotive of China's economic prosperity, the early state of Chu was celebrated in exhibitions, museums and academic conferences as a powerful ethno-symbolism of the Chinese people (Friedman 1994, 79). Similarly, China's

ever-increasing economic partnership with Japan and the other small “Confucian” dragons in East and Southeast Asia led to the reevaluation of Confucius as one of the new presiding deities decorating the pantheon of Chinese nationalism. And it is hardly surprising that the Chinese state excavated Koguryō in 2003 and integrated it within its multiethnic national narrative to correspond to the new status of Northeast China as an economic powerhouse. Openness to the outside world, China believes, must go hand-in-hand with certain policies aimed at strengthening nationalist pride and cementing the bond of emotional integration.

It is within this political context of Chinese nationalism that we can understand why Chinese scholars began to take interest in Koguryō in the post-Mao era, and why several works on the history of Koguryō and Kwanggaet'o stele were sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the last two years. While it is not possible to take up all the relevant works for discussion, I will take a couple of influential works for scrutiny. Wang Jianqun's book *Haotaiwangbei yanjiu* (A Study of the Stele of King Hot'ae) represents the first major attempt in China to study the subject from diverse interpretive angles. It is also the first book to provide a meticulous account of the circumstances under which the stele was discovered and the process through which the early impressions of the inscription were made and circulated amongst scholars in China and Japan. His discussion of the early techniques to make impressions provided a compelling evidence to dispel the suspicion of Yi Chinhŭi (1992, 1-9) that the original text was mutilated and manipulated by Sakawa Kageaki in order to favor Japan's imperialist interest. Wang pointed out that in the process of extracting the stele from the depth of the earth, it was damaged and the inscription partially defaced. Later Chu Tianfu and his son, Chu Junde who sold impressions of the stele until the early twentieth century, filled in its damaged parts and missing characters of with lime. The early rubbings, therefore gave a misleading impression of text-doctoring (Wang 1984, 1-41).

Solid as Wang's scholarship is, he failed to overcome the predominant nationalist bias. He was firm in his preconceived notion that Koguryō was a vassal state of China, and when he encountered uncomfortable evidence such as “Yōngnak,” an independent reign title of Hot'aewang, he dismissed

it outright. He cited the evidence of the discovery of a brick, bearing the reign title “Taining” of Eastern Jin, within the borders of Koguryŏ, and contended that it was inconceivable that King Kwanggaet’o employed his own reign title, emblematic of his independent status of the (Chinese) state on the Central Plain (Wang 1985, 221-222). One may argue that the tile in question just shows that more than a thousand families who escaped to Liaodong in 313 and settled within the Koguryŏ domain, may have continued to use the calendar of Western Jin. Dongshou 冬壽, a prominent migrant to Liaodong in the early 4th century, is one such example. Besides, we need to remember that the dating of the brick inscription as “Taining 4th year 太寧四年” is not conclusive. Wei Cuncheng 魏存成 has suggested the correct reading as “Taishou 4th year 太守4年 or 325 AD” (Wei 1996, 268-269). It is also significant to note that in the early fifth century, a prominent Chinese, introduced as a “Disciple of Sakyamuni” bore Koguryŏ’s official titles and used the reign title of King Kwanggaet’o. This is testified in the Tŏkhŭng-ni inscription of 409 (Ho 1984, 4-5). One may also note that independent reign titles were used by the other contemporary kingdom of Silla. It is obvious that Wang’s argument that “Yŏngnak” was not a reign title but one of the royal titles of King Kwanggaet’o, similar to Hot’aewang, is too simplistic to be sustainable.

Chinese publications on Koguryŏ increased remarkably in 2003 when China launched the so-called Northeast Project. This project is a semi-academic undertaking, aimed at achieving strategic goals by providing ideological underpinning to the state’s political and economic agenda (Ch’oe 2004). The avowed objective of the project, outlined on its homepage ([www.chinaborderland.com](http://www.chinaborderland.com)), highlights the cultural, demographic and economic significance of the three provinces of northeast China and underscores the need to provide a systematic understanding of the history and culture of this region in order to meet the new geopolitical realities and the related challenges in the era of opening and reform. It further discusses various limitations in terms of theoretical framework and bibliographical resources that inhibited so far the development of academic research of Northeast China.

The Northeast Project is responsible for research on a broad spectrum of issues, including the history of Koguryŏ, Parhae and the Korean ethnic

minorities in China, and is divided in three categories, research, translation and organization of materials. The fact that the project is meant to undergird social stability and economic prosperity in the region is apparent in the reference to the pivotal strategic position of China's Northeastern borderland in Northeast Asia, the most dynamic and also one of the most volatile regions of the world. This is also attested by the project's stated goal to "counter confusion derived from deliberate distortion of facts by scholars, research organizations and politicians of a certain country." It is also remarkable that the advisory committee of the project includes top cadre of the Communist party of China and other officials from the provincial administrations. It appears that the project owes its genesis primarily to the pressure of contemporary political realities of China. The Chinese attempt to nationalize the history of Koguryō and other states that rose and fell within the contemporary Chinese border is meant to authenticate the political imagination of the contemporary Chinese leadership. In other words, indigenization of Koguryō as a powerful "ethno-symbolism" may perhaps be interpreted as a device to meet the threat of irredentist nationalism that may either originate in the region or spread from across the border. The political character of the project is evident in all its publications, including the multi-authored book, *Gudai Zhongguo Gaogouli lishi xulun* (Continued Essays on The History of Koguryō of Ancient China) which sets out to prove that Koguryō was a provincial administration of China and all the Koguryō rulers were the vassals of China, ceaselessly bound to their suzerain through faithful observance of tributary relationship (Ma 馬大正 2003, 3-13, 97-146).

The authors perform this task by selective and discriminate use of Chinese sources and disregard of epigraphic evidence. The original Chinese source makes it apparent that Koguryō made a transition from its status of a weak tribal polity, tied to the Xuantu Commandery, to an independent early State during the reign of Wang Mang in 12 AD. In this year the people of Koguryō openly defied the order of the Chinese ruler to participate in the campaigns against Xiongnu 匈奴, rebelled, raided and ransacked the Chinese settlements and killed the Chinese governor. Later when the Chinese General Zhuang Yu enticed Ch'u, the Marquis of Koguryō and assassinated him, popular anger against China and the attendant widespread revolt erupt-

ed on a large scale which Wang Mang was unable to repress. However, in the book, sponsored by the project, one finds only a truncated version of the event that suited the ideological agenda of the author. The authors just mention two facts: first, Koguryŏ was a vassal state and therefore, it was ordered to participate in a military expedition and second, since the Koguryŏ chief defied the order of the Chinese ruler, he was killed. This is one of the many examples of very selective use of data.

Another relevant Chinese work is entitled *Haotaiwang bei yi qian wu bai liu shi nian zai* (The 1560th Anniversary of King Hot'ae Stele) by Geng Tiehua 耿鐵華, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2003. It also forms a part of China's Northeast Project. Geng emphasizes Koguryŏ's tributary relations with rulers on the Central plains. Indeed, as Professor Chŏn Haejong has suggested, in Sino-Korean relations, the tribute-giving, investiture and dispatch of congratulatory emissaries by Korean kings as typical tributary relations appeared only spasmodically in the pre-Tang period and Koguryŏ, in particular, often found its world view in conflict with the Chinese world order (Chŏn 1970, 37-43). While the scope of this paper does not allow a full discussion of Koguryŏ's relations with all the Chinese states on the Central Plain (Zhongyuan 中原), one may note in passing that Koguryŏ derived its strength from its warfare with the Chinese states. As has been already pointed out, in 12 AD the people of Koguryŏ launched their first major offensive against the Chinese state, and in subsequent history they ceaselessly resisted the military pressure of various non-Han dynasts of the north who jostled for power, including the devastating attack by Wei in 244-245 and later by the Sui dynasty. Koguryŏ survived a series of fierce Chinese invasions, because they could not break its tributary structure that extended to Okchŏ and the lowland areas.

Sound historical scholarship on Koguryŏ also requires that materials on the state's self-perception are examined. In Kwanggaet'o inscriptions, Moduru inscription and the "Old Samguk Sagi" preserved in the *Tongguk Yi sangguk chip*, the royalty of Koguryŏ is described as a "Descendant of Heaven" or the "Grandson of the Emperor of Heaven." If we look at inscriptions and other materials carefully, we find many other instances of Koguryŏ's independence vis-à-vis the Chinese World Order (Sin Hyŏngsik

1997, 641-644; No T'aedon 1999, 356-391; Kim Chōngbae 2004a, 13-20). Koguryō rulers employed their reign titles, imposed tributary obligations on several tribal settlements, and engaged in open hostilities with rulers on the Central Plain. The project's publications on Koguryō also suppress China's (Zhongyuan) perception of Koguryō. In Wang Mang's edict Koguryō is described as one of the "barbarians beyond the four frontiers who have usurped the royal title and called themselves kings." While all the Chinese historical annals counted Koguryō as an "Eastern Barbarian" outside the pale of China, the Korean sources have been consistent in reckoning it as part of "Haedong" (East of the Sea), Samhan 三韓 or the Three "Han" states (Kim Chōngbae 2004b) and "Gu Han 九韓" or the Nine Han states (Hwang 1997, 168-175). The project also shows ignorance of the recent Western scholarship on the principles and practices of Confucian World Order, and seeks to build a thesis of utter improbability on the premise that China has eternally been a multi-ethnic state and its present borders are sanctified eternally by historical memory.

Obviously, the Chinese world order, marked by tribute and investiture, is not quite helpful to understand the early history of Northeast Asia on the Chinese frontier. We may borrow the concept of mandala, formulated by the scholars of Southeast Asia, to interpret this political space. Traditional mandala-like polity is made up of concentric circles which represent the relations between the centre and its peripheral regions (Mabbet, 1999). Based on a similar understanding of the concept of mandala, Stanley J. Tambiah developed his concept of galactic polity to describe the political formations in traditional Southeast Asia. Tambiah's notion posits a "centre-oriented space (as opposed to bounded space)" with a fluid boundary whose expansion and shrinkage corresponds to increase or decrease in the power of the centre. In contrast to the structure of bureaucratic hierarchy, galactic polity has a constellation of reduplicated political units and, though their sizes vary, each lesser unit is a replica of the larger one. A close reading of the political history of Koguryō makes it clear that its Mandala of influence "expanded and contracted in a concertina-like fashion" (Wolters 1982, 17). If we borrow Tambiah's lens to look at galactic picture of Koguryō, we find that, it was surrounded by differentiated satellites, which were more or less autonomous

entities held in orbit and within its sphere of influence of the center (Tambiah 1976, 102-131).<sup>6</sup>

### Korean Interpretations

Modern Korean historiography was a radically nationalist inversion of Japan's Orientalist historiography, a counter-discourse of the assumptions implicit in Japan's historical practice during the Meiji period. Like the call of an Indian nationalist leader, Bankimchandra Chatterjee to his countrymen in the late 19th century to write their own history, Korean intellectuals in the early twentieth century engaged in an impassioned quest for an alternative historiography. A noted historian of modern India, Ranajit Guha argues that Bankimchandra's appeal was undergirded with nostalgia for the past in such a way as to "allow memory to usurp the estate of history," and that "the ideological function of this linkage has been to generate an atidesa<sup>7</sup> effect by which a knowledge of the Indian past is converted into a category of Indian nationalist thought." Guha further points out that nostalgia in itself does not constitute a sufficient condition for the production of historiography for a nation in the same way as it does not produce an autobiography for an individual, but what is common in the nostalgic urges in the life of a nation and an individual is that they are "informed by a notion of the Other" (Guha 1997, 154)

In fact it is the concept of the "notion of the Other" in nationalist historiographical urges which is relevant to our discussion of the Korean historiographical agenda, particularly as represented by Sin Ch'aeho (1880-1937). Sin was the most representative nationalist historian of the early twentieth century, whose historical writings can be described as explorations of the interpretive "otherness" about the Korean past. They were particularistic

<sup>6</sup> Tambiah's theory has been used by such scholars of other Asian countries as Dreyfus (1985, 130-132) and Heitzman, 1997, 224-225) in their studies of traditional polities.

<sup>7</sup> According to Guha's glossary, Atidesa means "a linguistic operation in Sanskrit grammar and poetics which allows for the metonymic extension of a phenomenon beyond its original scope." See Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University press, 1997). It appears that Guha has taken the term from Astashyayi by Panini, the preeminent grammarian of ancient India.

histories charged with an intense realization of Korea's unique racial identity and a sense of community. They were, furthermore, specifically addressed to the challenges of Japanese theories about Korean history, and were intended as a means to promote the national self strengthening and enlightenment movement. For instance, Sin's emphasis on Manchuria as an integral part of Korea's geographical self-identity and projection of Koguryō as emblematic of autonomous history were an articulation of a nationalist historical consciousness and represented a response to the challenges of the imperialist historiography (Armstrong 1995, 2-3; Schmid 1997, 26-42). Sin's theory identified the conflict between self (a 我) and non-self/other (pi-a 非我) as the major stimulus of the development of history, which implied that the early history of Korea was characterised by spatial dichotomies between Korea (self) and China (non-self), so that the indigenous culture of Korea had to wrestle with the imported sinitic civilization (non-self/other) in order to retain its independent identity (Han Yōngu 1981, 625-652; Ryang 1990, 13-52; Lee 1992, 483-485).

Korean historians of the early post-war era, working under the radiating influence of Sin's historiographical concerns and overwhelmed by the sentiments of defensive nationalism, vehemently refuted any suggestion of the "sacred" Korean territory falling under the shadow of Japan in the pre modern times. Some nationalist Korean historians, notably Chōng Inbo (1955, 673-677) and subsequently Kim Sōkhyōng (1966, 366-380) and Pak Sihyōng (1985, 196), two prominent historians from North Korea, espoused that the "sinmyo" year passage needed to be read with different punctuation marks than those given by the Japanese historians. According to Chōng's reading, the full stop has to be placed after the verb "came." He further argued that the Koguryō king Kwanggaet'o, the subject of the earlier entry, in which he was described as launching an invasion again Piryō, was to be understood as the subject of the verb "crossed/crossing the sea" in the "sinmyo" year passage also. He also insisted that in relation to the verb "defeated," was to be understood as the object, even though the sentence originally lacked an object. When Professor Chōng supplied his own subject and object, the translation is obtained as: "In the sinmyo year (391) Wa came. (Koguryō), crossing the sea, defeated (Wa)." This reading is doubtless

ingenious, but not quite consistent with the accepted grammatical rules of Classical Chinese.

### A Fresh look

How can we understand the true character of the stele? As outlined in the introductory remarks, first of all we need to look at various ideological currents which emanated from the Sino-Indian cultural universe and to which the Koguryŏ royalty was exposed in the wake of the advent of Buddhism. The stele was, after all, a product of the contemporary ideology.

It is remarkable that Koguryŏ established T'aehak, a Confucian Academy, in the same year (i.e., 372 AD) as Buddhism was officially recognized, and a legal code was promulgated soon thereafter. Apparently, what probably impressed Koguryŏ royalty was the so-called "Chinese cultural package," the coherent ensemble of Buddhist motifs and the mechanism of Confucian statecraft, such as writing system, including the Chinese practice of erecting funerary stele, historiography and the related institutions of China. It is also interesting to note that the Koguryŏ court enthusiastically patronized Buddhism, because it was aware of the social and political value of Buddhism at the time when it was attempting to make a transition to a full-fledged centralized state. These two aspects, the Buddhist notion of kingship and new historiographical tradition throw important light on the character of Kwanggaet'o stele.

It is generally agreed that the process of the consolidation of monarchical authority in the three early Korean states coincided with the rise of Buddhism, as Buddhism and kingship contracted a mutually empowering relationship. Monarchs extended munificent patronage to Buddhism, and Buddhism provided an ideological rationale to sacralize the status of rulers by extending to them the symbolic significance of a cakravartin or cosmic ruler, Maitreya and Bodhisattva. It is not a coincidence that steles and only those inscriptions of early Korea that were set up after the introduction of Buddhism demonstrate the notion of sacredness of the status of royalty.<sup>8</sup> King Kwanggaet'o stele describes Chumong as born with sacred/sagely attributes and tomb epitaph of Moduru, a court official of Koguryŏ, repeat-

edly refers to Koguryō kings as Sacred kings or Sacred great kings (Hwang, 1974, 30). A similar pattern is evident in two other contemporary states. A sixth century inscription refers to King Pōphŭng as Sacred King Pōphŭng 聖法興王. King Pōphŭng's successor, King Chinhōng was equated with India's sage-ruler Asoka (Mohan, 1994) and a Paekche ruler of the sixth century was called Songwang (also mentioned in such Japanese texts as the *Nihon shoki* and the Ganggoji Engi as Sōng Myōng Wang (Sacred/sagely and Enlightened King). Such a notion of sacredness is absent from the inscriptions of the previous century.

The sacredness of monarchical status is closely related with the Buddhist notion of ideal ruler, cakravartin, to which I have referred earlier. The early Buddhist texts describe a cakravartin ruler, as possessing seven jewels and divine attributes; but in China, where translators rendered the term as a divine emperor with flying wheels or a flying emperor (feixing huangdi), as has been noted by Zurcher, the supranormal element of the concept became additionally clear. Extravagant portrayal of the quality of a cakravartin ruler is evident in his equation with the Buddha, and in the fact that both the Buddha and the cakravartin ruler are said to possess thirty two distinctive physical marks of greatness on their body. King Asoka of early India was described in Buddhist texts as an archetypal exemplar of the ideal Buddhist kingship. *Asokāvadāna*, a hagiography of King Asoka, translated in Chinese in the early 4th century as *Ayuwang jing* 阿育王經 describes Buddha as making a prophecy, "Asoka is to become a cakravartin king over Jambudvīpa. No one is to challenge him" (Mukhopadhyaya, 1963, 166; Strong, 1983, 208-210). King Asoka is credited in his Buddhist hagiographies with building 84,000 stupas all over Jambudvīpa. Legends about Asokan stupas became so popular that according to the *Guang hong ming ji* (Fascicle 15, Taisho 52, 201-202), the Chinese people during the Tang

8 Miwha Stevenson has carefully looked at these and other epigraphic evidence from Koguryō to demonstrate that Buddhism brought new definition of monarchical ideas and new strategies of political legitimation. Stevenson correctly notes, 'Could it be that, even though Buddhist concepts do not appear in the Koguryō inscriptions at all, some of these new semantic dimensions of sagehood (sheng), the way (dao), and virtue (de) are informing the language of the monarchical myth and power used in the Kwanggaet'o and Moduru inscriptions?' See "Buddhism in Fourth Century Koguryō and Monarchy," An unpublished paper presented at the conference "Korea's Place in the East Asian Buddhist Tradition". Los Angeles, California, September, 1995, p. 41.

believed that approximately 20 out of 84,000 Asokan stupa existed within their territory (Yamazaki, 1979, 82). According to the “T’apsang” (Stupas and Statues) section of the *Samguk yusa*, one such stupa existed within the territory of Koguryō (Yodongsōng Yukwang t’ap). The fabricated “discovery” of the remains of Asokan stupas, remarks Eric Zurcher in the context of early medieval China, was proclaimed and perceived as a portent of Heaven’s pleasure at the benevolent rule of the emperor. To quote Zurcher: “The so-called relics of Asoka—often found by people with close connections with the court—not only proved the existence of Buddhism in China in a distant part, but also served as “auspicious responses” (ruiying) of Heaven, confirming the legitimacy of imperial rule” (Zurcher, 1980, 406-7). The *sinmyo* year passage of the stele is also to be read as a representation of the new notion of kingship in Koguryō, an apotheosis of King Kwanggaet’o as a cakravartin or universal ruler, exercising moral and political authority over all the peripheral areas. The great military successes of King Kwanggaet’o are indeed commendable. True to his posthumous title, he broadened the territorial reach of his kingdom. In 396 he led a successful military campaign against Paekche and forced King Ahwa to pledge allegiance to the Koguryō throne. In 410 he subjugated Eastern Puyō, and we have on the testimony of Chinese sources that his military expedition on the north-Western frontier was also very fruitful. King Kwanggaet’o’s hold over Liaodong is evident in the inscription of the tomb of its Chinese governor, discovered in 1976 at Tōkhūngni 德興里. As has been pointed out earlier in this essay, the unknown governor of Liaodong used the reign-title of King Kwanggaet’o and his many titles included the aristocratic rank conferred to him by Koguryō (Gardiner 1984; Yi Inch’ōl 2000, 179-190; Im Kihwan 2004, 181-199).<sup>9</sup>

While King Kwanggaet’o’s greatness is not disputed, exaggerated praise of his power is evident in the equation of Paekche with Silla as the vassal state (of Koguryō) from antiquity. Historical texts tell us in unequivocal terms that until 396 Paekche was the most fierce political rival of Koguryō, and even though a pledge of allegiance was imposed on Paekche after its defeat, it continued to resent Koguryō’s hegemony and explore ways to reassert its autonomy. Insertion of Wa in the text is apparently meant as a

back-cast projection of mirror so as to legitimize King Kwanggaet'o's invasion of this kingdom in 396, with the obvious implication that the King had to take recourse to weapons because of an intrusion of a foreign power in his legitimate "manadala" of influence. As Ken Gardiner has noted, the depiction of Wa as crossing the sea and wresting Koguryō's "old domains" serves a very useful purpose of transforming the saga of war into a "story of Koguryō's civilizing mission and the benevolent nature of its rulers" (Gardiner, n.d.). By showing King Kwanggaet'o as inflicting crippling defeat on Wa, he was projected as a true cakravartin, victorious in all directions and as the axial power of the political universe. This symbolism of Koguryō's pivotal position in the mandala is also suggested by the construction of nine temples in P'yōngyang, the future capital of the state. The number nine refers to nine directions, including centre. The establishment of a nine-story pagoda in Kyōngju in the mid-seventh century appears to be part of the same pattern.

The assumption that the story of Wa--Koguryō war was not a historical truth but propaganda becomes clearer if we look at the contemporary history of Yamato. Although *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* suggest that Japan achieved political unity very early in history, the truth remains that it was not until the early fifth century that the court of Yamato, originally confined to the Kinai region was able to weld several independent *ujis* or clan-based centers of power into an incipient form of centralized polity. Real centralization of power was achieved a century later, because even in the sixth century Kyushu was not firmly integrated within the orbit of Yamato power and it indeed impeded Yamato's communications with the continental world. In my view Wa did not cross the sea, and did not engage in battles with Paekche and Silla, as these military expeditions were well beyond its capacity in the late fourth century. Reference to Wa in the Stele is, therefore, a rhetorical exaggeration in the style of ancient India's inscriptional "prasasti" or panegyric writings engraved on stone. The claim of King Kwanggaet'o's

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Gardiner has also discussed these issues in detail in his unpublished seminar paper, "Unromancing the Stone: Towards an Understanding of the Kwanggaet'o Stele of Koguryō," 1984. I am grateful to him for making his unpublished paper available to me and discussing the political history of Koguryō with me on several occasions.

military success over the Wa may, therefore, be read as a formulaic device, intended to justify retroactively his invasion of Paekche a few years later. This device turns his invasion into a righteous war, and in the process authenticates his status as a cakravartin ruler, victorious in all the directions.

Contemporary Indian stelae of the 3rd-4th centuries illustrate how the writers of inscriptions sought to emphasize “digvijay” literally, conquest in all the directions, of the rulers to whom the stele were dedicated. One may cite Allahabad pillar of Samudragupta or Mandasor pillar inscription of Yasodharmana which enumerate their victories of all the lands from ocean to ocean in the Indian sub-continent (Fleet, 1966, reprint; Salomon, 1998, 229-236). These Indian stelae contain such stereotypical expressions as “his fame pervaded the entire surface of the earth, caused by his conquest of the whole world,” “skilful in engaging in hundred battles of various kinds,” “exterminator of all kings, with no rival of equal power in the world, whose fame was tasted by the waters of the four oceans.” North China in the same period, bound by close Buddhist linkages with India and the attendant traffic of Indian monks, witnessed the same practice of inscribing effusive and exaggerated praise on funerary steles. The situation of inscribing falsehood in praise of the deceased became so pervasive and alarming that the state had to ban the practice through an imperial decree (Chen 1975; Zhao 1994). To quote from *Songshu*, the dynastic Annal of Liu-Song:

In 278 (the fourth year of Xianning), Wudi of the Jin 晋 decreed again: “Steles and stone animals condone unwarranted accolade, and thus give rise to falsity and exaggeration. In terms of waste of money and harmful influence, nothing is more serious than this. Without exception, (the practice of erecting) steles and stone animals will be banned. ... During the reign of Yixi (408-418), Pei Songzhi, head of the Ministry of Sacrifices, recommended the reintroduction of the ban which has been in full force till now, i.e., the Liu-Song dynasty. (Zhao, 1994, 87-88).

Koguryō was obviously exposed to the Chinese tradition of historiography and panegyric inscriptions through its long interaction with the Chinese, and particularly in the fourth century when several leading Chinese literati

fled North China in order to escape the civil war in the Murong kingdom, and were possibly absorbed in the Koguryō officialdom, its knowledge of the Chinese tradition further deepened. The official acceptance of Buddhism and the establishment of a Confucian Academy in 372 may be regarded as the endorsement of China's tradition or the Chinese cultural ensemble at the state level. The Kwanggaet'o inscription, therefore, bears a distinct mark of this broad Sino-Indian cultural influence in the form of an exaggerated praise to legitimize King Kwanggaet'o's status as a sacred universal ruler.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper I pointed out the limitations of the existing interpretations of the Kwanggaet'o stele, derived from competing versions of nationalism in East Asia. I also emphasized the need to examine it from a fresh interpretive angle of ideological history. With the arrival of Buddhism in Koguryō in the 4th century and the attendant dissemination of the related aspects of continental civilization, the kingdom (of Koguryō) was gradually incorporated into the Indian-Chinese Cultural ecumene and its elites became aware of the propagandist aspect of written words. Buddhist monks in Koguryō and Chinese members of the Koguryō officialdom were harbingers of Chinese learning in the state, and were doubtless aware of such traditions as the Indian historiography of "prasasti" (eulogy) and the practice of erecting lavish stelae in China in the 4th and early 5th centuries. It is erroneous to interpret it as a faithful record of historical truth. Hirano has already stressed its propagandist character (Hirano, 1977, 57-82) and Ken Gardiner, in his unpublished seminar paper, equated it with the Indian "prasasti." My paper extended these arguments and expanding the frontier of enquiry further by suggesting the possible influence of cakravartin, the Buddhist notion of Kingship, the Chinese epigraphical genre and the rhetorical device found in the Indian inscriptional writings.

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