



**The Three in One, the One in Three:  
The Koryŏ Three Han as a  
Pre-modern Nation**

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## **The Three in One, the One in Three: The Koryŏ Three Han as a Pre-modern Nation**

This article seeks to explore the formation of Koryŏ identity from 918 to 1170 by focusing on several aspects of early Koryŏ. Considering the possibility of the existence of a pre-modern nation in Koryŏ, the article seeks to illuminate the questions of (a) a common name for the people and the land they inhabited and (b) the delineation of a historic homeland. By looking into these aspects, I hope to at least sketch the possibility of a pre-modern Koryŏ nation. Concretely, I shall investigate the notion of the Three Han (三韓 Samhan) and the way this notion acquired a supradynastical connotation that separated it from the historical actuality on the peninsula. Resulting in a notion of the Three Han that was both supradynastical and territorially delimited entity, held in protective stewardship by the Koryŏ kings, this notion suggests the possibility of a pre-modern Koryŏ nation within the borders of the Amnok and Tuman Rivers.

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**Introduction**

Are nations recent phenomena? Are they ancient entities, perennial forms of human societal organization? Or are they neither; neither necessarily modern, nor perennially present, but contingent forms of collective organization that can be found in different ages and places? In East Asia in particular there have been long-term territorial and political communities during pre-modern times with sophisticated administrative mechanisms and highly developed cultures. Would it not at least be possible that highly sophisticated states that existed hundreds of years and inhabited a stable core territory developed an identifiable national consciousness? Orthodox Western theories on nation-formation which deny this possibility, have been exported to East Asia, but have ironically never dealt with the East Asian situation (for some exceptions, see Duncan 1998 and Duara 1994). This paper seeks to address this issue by examining some aspects of early Koryŏ 高麗 (918-1170).

Observing Koryŏ history over the *longue duree* reveals that the interplay between subjective (mythical, historical, religious) beliefs and institutions, politics and history gave rise to a structure of relations and processes that became independent of those subjective beliefs. This structure provided the community with a framework for its members across generations. In essence, this structure formed the nation (Armstrong 1982). The identity of

such a community is located in the boundaries that define the criteria for membership. Boundaries soften or harden, so that the “cultural stuff it encloses” varies from time to time (Barth 1969). The persistence of the group, its fundamental identity, then, is located in the structure that governs its boundaries. In early Koryŏ, such a structure developed around the historical notion of the Three Han (Samhan 三韓).

Such a structure is dependent on several factors; on the presence of a named human population, the possession of a named and relatively extensive historic territory, a strong sense of a common past/descent, present and future/fate, a relatively unified economic, administrative and social structure, a shared public culture based upon religion, traditions and language and a common focus of worship in the ruler (Smith 2000, 65-76; Grosby 1997, 2, 26; Reynolds 1984, 335). Communities more or less in possession of these characteristics may be described as “communities bound together by ties of due and lawful order” (Reynolds 1983, 381), in which the modern requirement for nationhood of equality before the law was fulfilled by “the common worship of the god of the land and subjection to the king of the land who, in turn, received the authority to rule that land and the people of the God from that God” (Grosby 1997, 2). Region-transcending identities, or the idea of belonging to a community that is too large to allow general interpersonal relationships, is possible under such a structure, which is not governed by modernity or indeed necessarily modern.

The basis for such a structure to come into existence is the presence of a named population and its possession (or strong memory of) a named and relatively extensive historic territory. A nation can then come into existence, when, quite literally, mental and physical boundaries harden. When the constitutive myth of a community, its historical narrative of descent and fate, is selected among the various alternatives a community will invariably have, “heterogeneous, but related cultural practices” are unified and are imagined to be homogeneous - and to have always been so (Duara 1995, 168; Duara 1994, 168-9). The emergence of such a historical narrative signifies the hardening of the group boundaries; the selection of one narrative automatically means the exclusion of other possible narratives. In early Koryŏ, the notion of the Three Han fulfilled such a function.

With reference to the notion of the Three Han, this paper will explore the formation of Koryŏ identity from 918 to 1170 by focusing on these two aspects of early Koryŏ. Due to spatial considerations, I shall only look into (a) a common name for the people and the land they inhabited and (b) the delineation of a historic homeland. By looking into these aspects, I hope to at least sketch the possibility of a pre-modern Koryŏ nation. Such essential features as Koryŏ's foreign relations, the ruler as a focus of common worship, Koryŏ's repository of myths and history and its social, administrative and economic structure I shall leave for a future paper.

### **The Making of the Three Han in Koryŏ: 918-1170**

The Koryŏ period offers many examples of the different uses of 'Samhan' or the Three Han, but the concept itself clearly antedates this period. Its earliest occurrences can be traced to Chinese histories that incorporated information about the peninsula and its inhabitants. Traditionally, it was explained as the collective appellation of three early historical communities in the south of the peninsula, Mahan 馬韓, Pyŏnhan 卞韓 and Chinhan 辰韓 (Shin Hyŏnung 2003, 1-29). Here, however, I shall only occupy myself with the later use of the term as a general appellation for the Korean peninsula, its states and its inhabitants which came from a consistent use of the term in titles, edicts, inscriptions, epitaphs and popular folk songs during the Koryŏ period, as well as from a sense of historical unity that I will discuss below. Roughly speaking, 'Samhan' appeared in three different meanings or senses; it occurred in the sense of the historical Three Han, in the sense of the historical Three Kingdoms along with its derivative use referring to the Later Three Kingdoms, and in the sense of the Korean peninsula and its inhabitants.

Textual evidence from this period points at the formation on the Korean peninsula of an identity that assumed the common provenance and destiny of the different peoples that made up the 'Samhan' (No T'aedon 1982, 129-156). The disintegration of Silla in the ninth century into three competing states, the Later Three Kingdoms, each of which had fallen back on its pre-unification predecessor for legitimitative purposes, was

another historical contingency that advanced the sense of identification with the historical 'Samhan'. References during the early Koryŏ period all point to the Three Han in the sense of the Later Three Kingdoms; most representative of this use is perhaps the ritualized expression "T'aejo unified [pacified] the Three Han" that is found in many royal edicts and inscriptions. Clearly, the references are to the historical unification of the peninsula under the rule of the founder of the Koryŏ state (*KS* 1:7a; 2:2a-b; 2:12a; 2:15b). This usage continues until the end of the dynasty (*KMC* 469:6). Nonetheless, other usages of 'Samhan' can also be found during this period, although with less frequency. A letter that T'aejo sent to his great rival Kyŏn Hwŏn in 928 mentions the Three Han. 'Samhan' here can be interpreted in two complementary ways, both as pertaining to the contemporary political situation on the peninsula and as a comprehensive designation of the peninsula (*Samguk sagi* 50: 473). T'aejo's use of 'Samhan' prefigured its use during the Koryŏ dynasty. As used by Wang Kŏn in his letter to Kyŏn Hwŏn, it utilized the historically produced semantic range of 'Samhan' to the fullest extent; the same notion at once described the current situation on the peninsula and appealed to the past when it had been unified. These two usages, in short, are most frequent during the early years of the Koryŏ dynasty.

'Samhan' as a general designation for the Korean peninsula and its inhabitants came into wide use during the Koryŏ dynasty. Koryŏ rulers possessed the right "to rule over [the territory of] the Samhan" (*KS* 2:34a; 5:29a).<sup>1</sup> This idea was enforced by the occasional letter of investment from Chinese dynasties, in which Koryŏ is identified with 'Samhan' (See *KS* 2: 3b; 3:3a; 7: 33a). The availability of the term 'Samhan', already enriched by centuries of rather loose use by Chinese chroniclers, combined with the political circumstances on the peninsula during the late ninth and early tenth centuries and made it possible for this term to gradually become a comprehensive designation of the peninsula and its peoples. This transition was

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<sup>1</sup> In Buddhist inscriptions and epitaphs from the same period, 'Samhan' is used in the same manner. Some extant epitaphs for famous literati from distinguished clans also use 'Samhan' as an alternative designation for the peninsula; see *KMC* 39:14, 40:21; 41:8, 11-2.

'complete' when in 1136 Koryŏ sent a diplomatic letter to the Song 宋, mentioning among other things that "our Samhan have served the Chinese court generation after generation since the Han 韓 and the Tang 唐" (KS 16: 38b-39a). The Three Han had 'aged' significantly since the beginning of the dynasty when 'Samhan' was predominantly a synonym for the Later Three Kingdoms (*Han'guk kodae chungse komunsŏ yŏn'gu* — hereafter *HKCKY* 5: 18; 341: 12; *TMS* 31: 21b; *Chōsen kinseki sōran* — hereafter *CKS*- 469; *KMC* 70: 16). Incidentally, Injong's diplomatic letter came some thirty years after Sukchong had issued bronze coins of two different denominations, bearing the inscriptions "Samhan t'ongbo" and "Samhan chungbo" (KS 79: 11b; 79:15a).

During the middle Koryŏ, the meaning of the ambiguity-laden concept of 'Samhan' as a general designation of the peninsula became more significant, while the identification of 'Samhan' with the Three Later Kingdoms decreased. Instead, a tendency to identify 'Samhan' with its original meaning, the three historical Han states of Mahan 馬韓, Chinhan 辰韓 and Pyŏnhan 卞韓, became prominent (KS 57:1a; 72:1a; 7:33a-b; 56:1a; 57:1a; 72:1a). These different usages of 'Samhan' were used indiscriminately; in a 13<sup>th</sup> century memorial to the throne, for instance, 'Samhan' is, at different places, both used as an equivalent for the Three Later Kingdoms and as a general designation for the peninsula (KS 74:29b; 120:12b). Despite the obvious ambiguity of the name 'Samhan', a tendency can be distinguished toward the separation of the term 'Samhan' from the historical actuality of the peninsula.

While the sometimes indiscriminate use of the different meanings of 'Samhan' continues, from the middle of the Koryŏ dynasty, there is a clear shift in emphasis toward the term coming to signify a supradynastical entity that does not entirely correspond with Koryŏ. In a memorial from 1220 it was hoped that the 'Samhan' would know one million years of peace and tranquility (KS 120:12b). An edict of 1385 mentioned that the Koryŏ kings had protected the 'Samhan' for generations, a notion that had been recurring from the middle Koryŏ on (KS 135:42a-b). Extant documents of the Koryŏ testify to the enormous importance of the notion of 'Samhan' as the community of people on the peninsula; there is not one extant document

that contains the name Koryŏ.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we find the designation ‘Samhan’ that is used for the people and the peninsula (*HKCKY* 4:11; 6:32; 7:42; I, 23:10-1; I, 29:11; I, 32:7-8). The idea of a supradynastical entity called the ‘Samhan’ crystallizes during the late Koryŏ, but it was present in some form or other from much earlier, as is testified to by the epitaph for Ch’oe Sajŏn 崔思全 (1067-1139), of 1140. According to this epitaph, Ch’oe remonstrated Injong 仁宗 for giving free reign to his family-in-law, saying that “the Three Han are the Three Han of the Three Han. They do not stop at being Your Majesty’s Three Han. Our former lord T’aejo has worked hard to achieve this and I beg Your Majesty not to be negligent [in taking care of it]” (*KMC* 70:12-3). According to the same epitaph, Injong agreed and declared that he should “put the Three Han in order again” (*KMC* 70:6).

Curiously, at the same time that the designation ‘Samhan’ obtained a supradynastical connotation, it was also grounded in history more firmly than before. The Geography Section of the *Koryŏsa* treats ‘Samhan’ as a historical entity that existed before the Three Kingdoms, as does the Costume Section (*KS* 56:1a; *KS* 57:1a; *KS* 72:1a). Perhaps the most convincing testimony to this growing historical perception of the Three Han is the poem on the epitaph for Cho Yŏnsu of 1325 that alludes to Tan’gun: “Our ancestor from P’yŏngyang/the holy hermit Wang Kŏm/His people are still with us/What a wonderful leader he is!/He lived for thousands of years/before the ‘Samhan’ came into being/[...]” (*KMC* 451:17-19). A conflation of these two senses is distinguishable in statements that claim that Koryŏ succeeded to and “possessed” the Three Han, while simultaneously it is apparent that ‘Samhan’ was more than the historical reality that Koryŏ offered. ‘Samhan’ is described as incorporated in Koryŏ territory, but the two entities are not conflated, but on the contrary kept separate (*KS* 135: 42a-b; 74:29b; *TMS* 46: 18b; *CKS* 177). ‘Samhan’ represented the past of Koryŏ in its obviously historical quality; its present through an identification of ‘Samhan’ with the people of Koryŏ (*KS* 107: 20a; 126: 47a; *KMC* 388:

2 Those Koryŏ documents that use the word ‘Koryŏ’ prominently, such as the *Koryŏsa*, the *Koryŏsa chŏryo* or the genealogies of Koryŏ lineages, were all (re-)compiled after the transition to Chosŏn dynasty.

19) and its future through dissociation with Koryŏ when Koryŏ was declining (*KMC* 434: 5). Note incidentally that the separation of the notions of 'Samhan' and 'Koryŏ' enables the identification of 'Samhan' with Koryŏ's past, present and future.

'Samhan' was used in a number of distinctive ways; it surfaced as a synonym for the Three Later Kingdoms; it was also a synonym for the Three Kingdoms, the 'Samguk' (which itself was another synonym for Koryŏ); it was used as an alternative designation for Koryŏ; it retrieved its original meaning as a name for the historical Three Han states on the peninsula; and finally, and for our purposes most significantly, it acquired a supradynastical connotation that separated it from the historical actuality on the peninsula. In this sense, 'Samhan' came to be used as distinct from Koryŏ in a sense that represented both the country and its people, while other contemporary designations for the peninsula, such as 'Tongbang' 東方/東邦, 'Tongguk' 東國, 'Ch'ŏnggu' 靑丘 and 'Haedong' 海東 mainly appeared in contrast with or reference to Sinitic civilization. The importance of 'Samhan' increases when it is realized that the official dynastic name of Koryŏ was only used in diplomatic documents, formal statements (such as the opening lines of a tombstone inscription) and the like and never in domestic documents or in the main texts of tombstone inscriptions.

### **A Historic Homeland in Koryŏ**

The notion of a historic homeland is of immediate importance to the process of nation formation. In the case of Koryŏ, the historic homeland was more or less possessed by the people who according to themselves were supposed to inhabit it. Nonetheless, even during the early Koryŏ dynasty and certainly during the Chosŏn dynasty, there were heated discussions with much at stake about the precise boundaries of the ancestral lands of the people of the peninsula. In other words, to some extent the boundaries of the historic homeland were subject to redefinition. The Koryŏ dynasty was founded by reuniting the three states that had come into being after the disintegration of the Silla state. The territory of Koryŏ was thought to be limited, i.d. not subject to endless expansion. As a spatially limited realm, the people who inhab-

ited this particular piece of land were somehow different from all the peoples that lived in other territories. The notion of limitedness is indispensable for the notion of distinction, much like naming is.

The perception of the spatial finiteness of Koryŏ has been well documented from the beginning of the dynasty. It is of course hardly surprising that the inhabitants of the states on the Korean peninsula, bordered by the sea on three sides, should have experienced the spatial restrictedness of their states; resources comparable to the immense resources the Chinese and northern dynasties had at their disposal, were simply not available. This subsequently determined the realistic expectations one could entertain on the possibilities of spatial expansion. Consequently, territorial ambitions in Koryŏ were limited. The famous debates on expansion to and subjugation of the north (the only region to which expansion was practically feasible) were debates with, at least spatially, clearly limited goals. Both Wang Kŏn's expansionist dreams and the ultimately failed attempts at subjugation of the northern plains by Yun Kwan's Nine Fortresses were essentially aimed at creating safe borders and not at the acquisition of ever more territory (Ch' u Myŏngyŏp 1999; Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn 1978, 28).

As the turbulent foreign politics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries clearly show, there were different opinions about the guarding of the borders, about the question what lands belonged to Koryŏ and where the borders should run. The most pertinent frontier problem was in the north. Although historical arguments were used to solidify claims to territories associated with the glory of former days, these arguments were often purely rhetorical and possessed little claim to historical veracity-which the speakers knew very well. Most instances of overt territorial identification with Koguryŏ 高句麗 were occasioned by immediate territorial threats-that often menaced more territory than those few pieces of undisputed Koguryŏ territory that Koryŏ controlled. The relatively limited nature of identification with Koguryŏ is remarkable: identification seems to have been mainly of a territorial-political nature. It was in other words to a significant extent both limited and opportunistic. By the time of Wang Kŏn's 王建 unification of the peninsula, a more or less fixed idea of the historical homelands of the peninsula's people had come into existence and within these historically deter-

mined borders the future of Koryŏ was imagined to take place—as well as the past to have taken place.

Apart from its name, there is in fact only limited evidence that suggests that Koryŏ considered itself the direct successor of the state of Koguryŏ. From the beginning of the dynasty, Koryŏ quite consistently traced back its historical descent to three different states; Paekche 百濟, Silla and Koguryŏ, often represented by the comprehensive name of the Three Han.<sup>3</sup> In a limited sense, Koryŏ saw itself as a successor of Koguryŏ; namely, in the sense that the state of Koryŏ had been forged during five decades of intensive warfare between the three states into which the state of post-668 Silla had disintegrated. These three states had *mutatis mutandis* come to identify themselves with the pre-unification states of Paekche, Silla and Koguryŏ. The Koryŏ state was the latest to come into being; both this fact and its position in the north of the peninsula made the choice for identification with Koguryŏ obvious. Direct Koryŏ identification with Koguryŏ was limited to worship of Koguryŏ's founding ancestor, strong identification with Koguryŏ's later capital of P'yŏngyang 平壤 and the appropriation of a selected part of Koguryŏ's historical memories (Duncan 2004: 90-117). And perhaps more significantly, Koryŏ looked towards Koguryŏ, towards the north, in search of an example and not out of a sense of being directly related. Identifications by twentieth-century historians of Koryŏ with Koguryŏ expansionism reveal more about the intellectual climate during the colonial period in twentieth-century Korea than about Koryŏ history. Koryŏ's policies confirm that all through its history, it in effect duplicated Koguryŏ's defensive strength, and not its offensive expansionism, as for instance Kim Pusik's commentaries on Koguryŏ's battles in the *Samguk sagi* show (SGSG 44:420; 49:464-465). Previous research has already shown that bureaucratically, culturally and linguistically, the Koryŏ state built on the vestiges of Silla rather than Koguryŏ. The selectivity with which some elements of Koguryŏ's legacy were celebrated and remembered and other elements were

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<sup>3</sup> This did not mean, however, that Koryŏ's territory was thought to be limited to the historical territory of the Three Han. As will be shown, Koryŏ's historical territory was thought to be much larger than the historical territory associated with the historical Three Han.

more or less discarded speaks volumes with regard to the notion of historical succession in Koryŏ, as does the fact that none of Koryŏ's aristocratic families seems to have claimed a man of Koguryŏ stock as their founding ancestor (Duncan 2004, 91). Koguryŏ cultural influences did exist, such as in the field of astronomy and astrology, but these co-existed with cultural influences from Silla, Paekche, Manchuria and China (Kim Ilgwŏn 2003).

Domestically, the territorial notion of 'Samhan' had evolved into a notion of supradynastical but territorially grounded entity which the Koryŏ kings kept in protective stewardship. Several sources attest to the presence of this notion, stating that "our country completely possesses the Samhan", that "the territory of Koryŏ contains the Samhan" and that "generations of Koryŏ kings have protected the Samhan" (*KS* 74:29b; 135: 42a-b). It is also mirrored in contemporary Chinese sources, particularly in letters of investment. The 933 Later Tang 後唐 letter of investment mentions that T'aejo "unified the mighty Five Tribes and attained control of the territory of the Three Han". A 1049 investment of Munjong's 文宗 son as heir apparent described Koryŏ as "the old territory of the Samhan and the former name of Paekche" (*KS* 2:3b; 7:33a-b). Two letters of investment from the Song sent to Sŏngjong 成宗 in 983 and 985 elaborate on the same theme: "you [i.d. Sŏngjong] possess the old territory of the Samhan and the former feudal lands of Paekche" (*KS* 3:6a).

The Amnok 鴨綠江 formed the boundary between Koryŏ and foreign ground in the northwest, while the significantly shorter Tuman 豆滿江 did so in the northeast. The lands to the north of the Amnok had been the old territory of Koguryŏ, while the lands to the south of it were considered to have belonged to Silla, though historically this is inaccurate (*KS* 3: 6a; 82: 42b-43a). One entry in the *Koryŏsa* even claims the territory north of the Amnok to have belonged to Silla (*KS* 14:21a-b). Koryŏ references to the Amnok as the border of the country appear as early as the reign of Kungye 弓裔, as for instance in the puzzling mirror inscription that predicted Wang Kŏn's ascendancy. According to the interpretation of the scholars of Kungye's court, Wang Kŏn would "first grab the chicken and then strike the duck," which meant that Wang Kŏn would first occupy Silla (also known as Kyerim 鷄林, Chicken Grove) and then bring the peninsular territory up to

the Amnok River (literally “duck-like green river) under his control (KS 1:7b.). The belief that the Amnok River was the ‘natural’ northern boundary of Koryŏ was a widespread notion during the Koryŏ and was believed to have existed from times immemorial, since “our country has made the Amnok river its boundary ever since [the establishment of] Kija’s old territory” (KS 7:33a-34b). The whole of Koryŏ was believed to be south of the Amnok (KS 2:19a). Pak Illyang 朴寅亮 (?-1096) in a famous memorial to the Liao 遼 emperor stated that “the shape and energies of the Amnok river divide our country [from others] and form a boundary” (TMS 39: 5b-6b; 28:5a-6b). Ch’oe Ham 崔誠 (fl. mid-twelfth century) wrote a formal expression of gratitude to the Jin 金 emperor, claiming that “the frontiers of our country have from times immemorial run until the Amnok River. It is only a recent event that the Khitan took it away from us” (TMS 35: 23b-24b). Both men emphasized that the Amnok River had been a boundary demarcating the line between their country and others, whether barbarian or not. Their point of view was not uncommon, despite the prevalent historiographical tendency to ascribe a strong Koguryŏ-successionist identity to Koryŏ.<sup>4</sup> In 1117 the assembled officials (百官 *paekkwon*) offered a memorial to Yejong 睿宗 in which they congratulated the ruler with the return of Ŭiju 義州, imagined as ancient Silla territory according to the text, into Koryŏ territory (KS 14:20a-22b). This text, that was obviously meant for court consumption only, emphasizes the (imagined) status of the Amnok as the time-honored

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4 Koryŏ opposition was fierce every time the Liao tried to establish fortifications and bridges along the Amnok river in what was considered to be Koryŏ territory. This kind of fierce opposition should, however, not be equated with Koguryŏ-like expansionism. Koryŏ’s attitude was directly informed by security concerns, and not by expansionist ambitions. Munjong’s reign is known as the zenith of Koryŏ and is characterized by its stability. At this time, protests against the construction of Liao fortifications at the Amnok were at their peak, which makes it impossible to characterize these protests as expressions of expansionism. The fierce protests in the preceding and succeeding reigns of Chŏngjong and Sŏnjong are similar. See KS 6:16b; 10:8b; 10:15a. A case in point that shows the nature of Koryŏ’s diplomatic assertiveness not to be expansionist, is the realization that although the east of the Amnok River is undoubtedly Koryŏ territory, the land west of it are not. Both Sukchong and Yejong and their officials admitted this and did not attempt to lay claims to this territory. On the contrary, they complied with Liao or Jin requests not to station garrisons at the Amnok at places that would threaten to make incursions on Liao or Jin territory. See KS 11:30s-b; KS 13:19b-20b. For a discussion of this subject, see Breuker 2003.

boundary of both Silla and Koryŏ. In fact, the legitimation for considering the Amnok as such is wholly traced back to its imagined function as such during the Silla. This tracing of legitimation is remarkable in the sense that the majority of modern historians have called attention to the fundamentally Koguryŏ-based identity of Koryŏ, starting with the name of the dynasty. To be sure, there is as discussed before a definite and important Koguryŏ element in Koryŏ identity, but territorial identification with Koguryŏ was, as is evident from the citation above, by no means exclusive or even taken for granted. A 1126 memorial to the Jin emperor identifies the Amnok with Koguryŏ territory and hence Koryŏ's (*KS* 15:20a-21a.; *TMS* 35: 6b-7b). The only significant difference with the 1117 text mentioned above is location of territorial legitimation in Koguryŏ; the 1117 text after all had traced the origin of the Amnok boundary to Silla. This contrast is important and resurfaces in comparisons of other diplomatic writings with writings meant for domestic consumption.

The establishment of the Amnok River, and to a lesser extent that of the Tuman River, as physical and natural boundaries delineated the Koryŏ historic homeland. With the Amnok and Tuman guarding the northern border and with the sea watching over the other three borders, a clear picture of Koryŏ's homeland emerges: "Our Haedong blocks the sea at three sides. Only one side is connected to the mainland. The width of the peninsula nears 10,000 *ri*" (*KS* 56:1a). And "[...] the territory of Koryŏ is surrounded by the sea on three sides and one side is supported by mountains. Its girth measures several thousand *ri*" (*KS* 137:23b; *KS* 136:15a). This historically formed notion of the Amnok River guarding the north is also mirrored in the symbolic function it assumed. The crossing of the Amnok came to mean to go or to return from abroad.<sup>5</sup> In 1055, Munjong, upon hearing that the imperial Liao envoy had crossed the Amnok, immediately cut down on the number of side dishes at meals and forbade music to be performed and animals to be slaughtered or hunted (*KS* 7:35a-b; *KS* 64:18a.). Reports on barbarian

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance *KMC* 424: 5 (returning from the Yuan court is styled as "crossing the Amnok"); *KMC* 496: 12 (King Ch' unghye is welcomed by his officials on his return from the Yuan at the banks of the Amnok); *TMS* 15:14a.

incursions in the northern territories assumed urgency when the court was informed that they had “crossed the Amnok”. In this case, the natural defensive function of the Amnok River and the strongholds that had been built and manned along its banks and its symbolic meaning as the boundary between Koryŏ and the barbarians converge. The Amnok and Tuman Rivers provided Koryŏ not only with an easily defensible natural boundary, but also with a symbolic boundary that marked the transition into foreign territory. At the same time, they were inextricably connected to a kind of “frontier mentality”. It was at the banks of these rivers that the country had to be defended. The list of skirmishes, struggles and battles that took place there is virtually endless.<sup>6</sup> In his famous victory in 1018, Kang Kamch’an 姜邯贊 (948-1031) virtually wiped out the Khitan army at the battle near the fortress of Hŭnghwajin 興化鎮 (Ŭiju) (KS 9a-12b). The defensive line of fortresses built by Tŏkchong 德宗 in 1031 and 1032 also testifies to the frontier mentality of the Amnok region. This line of fortresses ran from the ancient capital of Koguryŏ, Kungnaesŏng, on the west coast where the Amnok River ran into the sea to the east coast, measuring more than a thousand li in total (KS 82: 31b-32a; KSC 4: 5a). These fortresses were physical representations of Koryŏ’s symbolic boundaries. Even more so than the events recorded in the *Koryŏsa*, inscriptions and epitaphs from the early and middle Koryŏ give a trenchant picture of the reality of the northern border in the lives of Koryŏ officials. In short, the northern boundary of the Amnok and Tuman Rivers was of the utmost importance for Koryŏ, both defensively and ideologically.

The northern frontier’s importance did not derive entirely from the functions of the Amnok River. The northern part of the peninsula also

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6 In 993, Sŏ Hŭi negotiated his famous settlement with the Liao armies to regain these parts of the Koryŏ territory. Sŏngjong had sent censor Yi Kyŏmŭi there to build frontier fortresses, but the Jurchen kidnapped him and only one out of three soldiers came back. In 1016 a large Khitan army invaded via this route. The *Koryŏsa* reports that tens of thousand soldiers died in the ensuing battle. When the Khitan sent an envoy to Koryŏ to restore relations, they were not allowed to cross the Amnok. “In the 7th year of Hyŏnjong in the first month of spring of kyŏngsul day the Khitan generals Yaryulseryang and Sogullyŏl invaded Kwakchu. Our armies fought them and tens of thousands died. Plundering the possessions of our soldiers the Khitan armies left. On *kabin* day a Khitan envoy of 10 people arrived at the Amnok River, but they were not received” (KS 4:19b). In the early twelfth century, when Yun Kwan built his Nine Fortresses in the Hamgyŏng area, he did so in order to protect this territory. See *SGSG* 34: 421-2; *KS* 3: 6a; *KS* 58:32b.

housed two mountains that were at the centre of the founding myths of Koguryŏ and Koryŏ. Mt. Paektu 白頭山 and Mt. T'aebaek 太白山 both figure prominently in the myths and legends of the peninsula.<sup>7</sup> Although the Amnok River figures more prominently in the annals of the Koryŏ due to its strategic importance, Paektu and T'aebaek loom impressively at the background of the historic homeland of Koryŏ. The Amnok and Tuman Rivers find their origins in Mt. Paektu, from which much of their symbolic meaning derives. To begin with, Mt. Paektu was imagined as the place of origin of the royal Wang clan, spurious though this assertion may be (*KS segye* 1: 1a). The foundation myth of Koryŏ did not provide an explanation for the origins of the peninsula and its people, but merely an account and legitimization of the provenance and road to power of the Wang clan. By way of the Great Trunk (大幹 *taegan*) mountain range of Mt. Paektu, the geomantic auspiciousness of Kaegyŏng 開京, Wang Kŏn's birthplace, was confirmed (*KS* 72: 11b-12a; 39: 18b-19a). A memorial from 1357 from the Deputy Director of the Institute of Astronomical Observation reiterated the importance of the Paektu mountain range for Koryŏ's well-being and quoted a work ascribed to Tosŏn 道誥, stating that "*The Record of the Jade Dragon* 玉龍記 says that our country originated in Mt. Paektu and ends in Mt. Chiri智異山" (*KS* 39: 18b-19a). This statement is confirmed in the *P'ahanjip* (*P'ahanjip*, *kwŏn* 1).

7 There is considerable confusion with regard to Mt. T'aebaek. Not only is here also a Mt. T'aebaek in Kangwŏndo which during Silla was worshipped as one of the Five Sacred Peaks 五岳, Mt. T'aebaek was also frequently used for Mt. Paektu. And to add to the confusion, Mt. Myohyang was also called Mt. T'aebaek before it acquired its present name. Due to spatial considerations, the question of Mt. T'aebaek will not be settled here, but some observations may be made. *The Shinjŭng Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* only recognizes the Mt. T'aebaek in Kangwŏndo, while the *Chŭngbo munhŏn pigo* 增補文獻備考, relying on the authority of famous historian and geographer Han Paekkyŏm 韓百謙 (1552-1615) to establish that there are two Mts. T'aebaek; one in Kangwŏndo, the other in Hamhŭngdo, to the north of Mt. Paektu. This is roughly what Chinese sources also state, although confusion with Mt. Paektu does occur. Koryŏ period sources such as the *Samguk yusa* and the *Samguk sagi* consistently conflate Mts. Paektu and T'aebaek. See *STYS* 3b-4a; *CMP* 13: 25a-b; *CMP* 20: 30b; *CMP* 23: 33b; *KS* 58:39a; *SGYS* 1: 199-200; *SGSG* 13: 145; *SGYS* 2: 199. Modern scholarship has not settled the question, but what matters here are the contemporary identifications of Mt. T'aebaek, even though they may have been mistaken. From this perspective, both Mts. Paektu and T'aebaek were frequently identified with each other and with other historically and religiously important mountains. See Rogers 1982, 33-36.

This notion was first explicitly articulated in the myths surrounding the geomancer Tosŏn 道誥 (827-898), whose legend played a crucial role in the legitimization of the rule of the Wang clan. When he supposedly met with Wang Kŏn's father, he had just returned from Mt. Paektu where he had been initiated into the practices of geomancy (Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn 1975, 101-146). In this manner, the relationship between Koryŏ, the Wang clan, geomancy and Mt. Paektu was strengthened. The belief that Mt. Paektu occupied a special position in the spiritual and geomantic life on the peninsula predates the Koryŏ period.<sup>8</sup> Mt. Paektu is mentioned prominently in the myths of descent of Koguryŏ and Paekche. The source of the Amnok River, Mt. Paektu figured as the background of the birth of Ko Chumong 高朱蒙, the later king Tongmyŏng 東明. Chumong, who had been conceived at the bank of the Amnok, founded Koguryŏ at the foot of Mt. Paektu (SGYS 1: 199-200; SGSG 13: 145; SGYS 2: 199). Tongmyŏng was revered all through the Koryŏ as the founding ancestor of Koguryŏ and, by way of his son Onjo, as that of Paekche as well. On the site of Tongmyŏng's palace in P'yŏngyang, the Yŏngmyŏng-sa 永明寺 was built, which would become famous for lodging Ado 阿道 (d.u.), the monk that transmitted Buddhism to Koguryŏ. The Koryŏ monarchs frequently visited King Tongmyŏng's palace whenever they were in Sŏgyŏng 西京 (which had been Koguryŏ's capital P'yŏngyang).<sup>9</sup> A shrine dedicated to Tongmyŏng and one dedicated to his mother "because she gave birth Chumong, the founder of Koguryŏ" stood in the mountains just outside of Kaesŏng (*Gaoli Tujing*, 178-179). The ancestral rites that were frequently held in honor of Tongmyŏng and the several honors that were bestowed upon his spirit, confirm the continued importance of Tongmyŏng both on a popular and an ideological level (KS 4: 9b; 13:3b-41; 58:31a; KSC 7:7b). It is also noteworthy that Koryŏ had a Chungmo-hyŏn

<sup>8</sup> And not from that period onwards, as is argued in Rogers 1982. Rogers' argument is based on an identification of Mt. T'aebaek with Mt. Paektu, but the Mt. T'aebaek mentioned as object of sacrificial rites was the Kangwŏndo T'aebaek. See Rogers 1982, 33-36.

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Koryŏsa* and the *Koryŏsa chŏryo* the palace was visited by Sŏnjong in 1087, by Sukchong in 1102, by Yejong in 1109 and 1116, by Injong in 1127 and 1132 and by Ūijong in 1169. See KS 10:13b; KS 11: 35b; KS 14: 11a; KS 15: 22a; KS 19:2b. The fact that Yŏngmyŏng-sa had been the place of the temporal burial of T'aejo (haengjaeso) adds much significance to the importance of this palace.

中牟縣. Chungmo 中牟 is one of the names Ko Chumong appears under in the *Samguk sagi*. The Koryōsa mentions that the name of the Silla *hyōn* Toan 道安 was changed into Chungmo after the transition to Koryō. It was located on undisputed Silla territory (KS 57:22b). According to Yi Kyubo 李奎報 “[t]he mysterious tales of King Tongmyōng are so well known that even ignorant men and simple women can tell them” (*Tongguk Yi Sangguk chip* 3:1a; translation Rutt 1975, 48-54). Geomancing monk cum rebel leader Myochōng 妙清 (?-1135) took advantage of the legends and legitimacy associated with Mts. Paektu and T’aebaek and named the first of his eight saints (八聖 *p’alsōng*) “Country-Protecting T’aebaek Holy Hermit of Mt. Paektu” 護國白頭岳太白仙人 (KS 127:29a). This was, according to Myochōng, none other than Manjusri himself, a bodhisattva often associated with Mt. Paektu; the remaining seven ‘guardian angels’ of Koryō were also manifestations of Buddha’s, bodhisattva’s and deva’s and associated with the Koryō landscape.

Mt. T’aebaek formed the background of the myth of Ko Chumong, just as Mt. Paektu did and is in fact often found to be identical with Mt. Paektu. It was thought to be the origin of the Han River 漢江 that flows through the peninsula (*Yōkchu yōktae kosūng pimun* 4:475.) According to Ch’oe Ch’iwōn 崔致遠, the survivors of Koguryō had gathered at the foot of Mt. T’aebaek after their defeat to the combined Tang-Silla armies and it had been there that Tae Choyōng 大祚榮 (r. 699-719) had proclaimed the founding of Parhae 渤海 (SGSG 46: 442-443).

The special position in both peninsular geography and mythology occupied by the Amnok River and Mts. Paektu and T’aebaek is not unique. Mt. Chiri in the south-west of the peninsula, for instance, is also a mountain richly adorned with mythological and historical lore (*P’ahanjip*, chapter 1). The Taedong River 大洞江 and the Yesōng River 禮成江 are similarly ornamented with tales, legends and histories. The difference is that neither Mt. Chiri nor both rivers were in contested frontier territory. The Amnok River and Mts. Paektu and T’aebaek were. The fact that they were positioned at the frontier and sometimes out of Koryō’s influence, made their functions all the more significant. The *Chosōn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 and the *Sinjūng Tongguk yōji sūngnam* 新增東國輿地勝覽 mention that, probably

sometime during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a stele had been discovered in Hoe'ryŏng 會嶺, a *tohobu* 都護部 [Protection District] located near Mt. Paektu. This stele had been erected by Yun Kwan 尹瓘 during his expedition against the Jurchen and it had four characters meaning "border of Koryŏ" (高麗之境) engraved on it (*STYS* 50: 33b; *SJS* 155:1a). The other inscriptions on the stele had been chiseled off by "barbarians". Yun Kwan's stele is a tangible symbol for the importance of the whole Mt. Paektu region, rivers, mountains and all.

Through the five centuries of Koryŏ's existence, the northern frontier has always been a contested area, an arena of continuous warfare and battle. There were only short periods of relative peace and tranquility. The automatic identification of the Mts. Paektu and T'aebaek and of the Amnok River with the natural and symbolic borders of Koryŏ, of the peninsula, was achieved during centuries of protracted warfare in those areas. Above, we have seen that a certain sense of a simultaneously historical and supradynastical entity came into being during the eleventh to twelfth centuries, which was among other ways expressed in the new meanings of 'Samhan' and other designations for the peninsula and its people. This also showed in the disconnection of the notion of 'Koryŏ' and the notion of the peninsula and its people, resulting in the prevalent view of Koryŏ entirely as a state. Geographically bounded historical events (mainly battles), myths and legends, national and local religious worship and the geographical circumstances of Korea-surrounded by the sea on three sides, walled of by mountains on the one remaining side-gave rise to the formulation of the idea that the peninsula was naturally and symbolically bordered by the Amnok River and Mts. Paektu and T'aebaek. "Ŭiju is the gateway to our land/heavily defended since old"; this is how Chŏng Mongju 鄭夢周 expressed this notion that was shared by a majority of Koryŏ literati. In this manner, a historic homeland was created where the Samhan were supposed to live and where in 991 Jurchen that were not considered as belonging to the Samhan and who were living at the banks of the Amnok "were driven away and made to live outside [the territory associated with] Mt. Paektu" (*KS* 3:24a).

The realization of a limited historic homeland is mirrored in the idea that there was a historic community that ought to live there. This communi-

ty was not necessarily coterminous with Koryŏ. The Three Han go beyond the ruler in the end, for “the Three Han are the Three Han of the Three Han” and not exclusively of the ruler. At the same time, such a contextualization of the ontologically unassailable position of the ruler puts into perspective the absolute nature of his status. Apparently, this status depended on its connection to the land and the people and on the condition that the ruler took good care of them. The latter is in itself is a classical Confucian doctrine, though not an undisputed one, because of its inherent revolutionary potential. The emphasis on the land and the people-the Three Han-is not necessarily Confucian; rather, it seems to be a Koryŏ elaboration of Confucian political theory. It points, however, to the assumption of an entity that is larger than Koryŏ and that transcends it not spatially but temporally. The idea of the temporal finity of Koryŏ, in other words the disconnection between Koryŏ and Samhan, is also supported by for instance the prevalent historiosophical beliefs that were based upon the theory of the Five Phases (Ch’oe Pyŏnghŏn 1978, 17-51). This theory assumed the continuous alternation of the five phases and explained the rise and fall of states using the sequence in which the five phases change into each other, resulting in a view of history that did not lend itself for perpetual states and everlasting dynasties. It lent itself all the more, though, for politically subversive prophecies that employed this concept by emphasizing that the natural course of the present dynasty had expired. It had various applications during the Koryŏ, but one that is of particular relevance here, is the old prophecy that predicted the fall of Kungye and the rise of Wang Kŏn and limited the lifespan of the Koryŏ dynasty to twelve generations or 360 years (*KS* 1:7a-b; Ch’oe Pyŏnghŏn 1978, 39-40.) This prophecy, that surfaced on and again during the Koryŏ, shows both the awareness of the inherent finity of the dynasty and the manner in which it is connected to the theory of the five alternating phases, as is demonstrated by several instances (*KS* 130:39b; 128:22b).

The assumption of the existence of a more principal entity than Koryŏ itself and of its temporal finity, effectively “devalues” Koryŏ and makes it susceptible for pluralist approaches. The Samhan, however, spatially limited by the sea on three sides and the mountains and rivers on the other side,

were thought to be granted a temporally more or less limitless existence, as we have seen above.

## Conclusion

The use of names during the Koryŏ for the land, the state and the people has perhaps surprisingly devalued the designation 'Koryŏ'. The preference for non-state designations for the peninsula and its people firmly enthroned the ubiquitous 'Samhan' or Three Han as the most important naming notion. It united several distinctly differing meanings in one name. In the twelfth century this resulted in a supradynastical notion of the 'Samhan' that separated it from the historical actuality on the peninsula. In this sense, 'Samhan' became different from the contemporary state of Koryŏ, while still embodying it-or being embodied by it-in its historical senses. 'Samhan' represented the past of Koryŏ in its obviously historical quality; its present through an identification of 'Samhan' with the people of Koryŏ and its future through dissociation with Koryŏ when Koryŏ was declining.

The complicated historical genesis of the Koryŏ state that gave it plural lines of descent also conditioned the usability of its myths of origin. The state of Koryŏ had to deal with several competing myths of origin, which meant that any claim to the past could be thwarted by an equally strong counter claim departing from another historical perspective. This is of course precisely what happened when competing forces collided, but at the same time it has become clear that the tracing of legitimation in Koryŏ ultimately led to the Three Han. It is certainly true that at times there existed an ambition to reconquer Koguryŏ lands, but at the same time it has become clear this was not as fundamental to Koryŏ identity as has often been claimed. Besides, expansion to the north cannot be simply equated with Koguryŏ. Continuity between Koguryŏ and Koryŏ must rather be located in Koryŏ's historical memories, its astronomy, its myths. On the other hand, a Silla-derived identity also existed at the same time and was even expressed by the same persons. The contradiction involved is only apparent, because the background against which these claims to the past were made was not Koguryŏ- successionism or Silla-successionism, but Samhan-successionism. It is still a con-

tradition on the surface-the level at which the notions of successionism are propagated by individuals and groups, but it should be realized that these images of either Silla or Koguryŏ that were conjured up were completely context-dependent. If we look at the circumstances that conditioned the production of such images, we find that underneath Koryŏ identity was more ambiguous, plural, fragmented and multi-faceted than its outward presented image suggested. On a deeper level, then, or in other words, against its historical background over a long period, the contradiction between Koguryŏ and Silla ceases to exist and gives way to what was the fundamental element of Koryŏ identity: succession to and embodiment of the Samhan. The complicated notion of Samhan was not without contradictions itself, but these were not caused by politically motivated competing claims to Koguryŏ and Silla.

The Three Han constituted the background of Koryŏ's historical identity, having evolved over a long period of time. The Three Han provided its people with a structure of relations, processes and historical associations that became independent of the subjective beliefs out of which it had evolved. This structure allowed members of the community to refer to a framework of shared ideas, memories and experiences with regard to who they were and where they were supposed to live. It also offers some solid clues to investigate early Koryŏ as a pre-modern nation, as it embodied Koryŏ's past, present and future, and presents connections to other constituent parts of Koryŏ's identity as a pre-modern nation; its social, economic and administrative structure, the place of the ruler as focus of common worship and a shared culture of traditions, customs and language. These aspects have not been treated here, but I hope that this examination of a common name for the people and the land they inhabited and the delineation of a historic homeland in Koryŏ has shown that the existence of a pre-modern Samhan nation in Koryŏ is by all means possible.

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