The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History: A Reconsideration of the Han Commanderies from a Broader East Asian Perspective

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The first state in Korean history, Old Chosŏn, was destroyed in 108 BC by an invasion from the Han empire. The Han empire established three commanderies within Chosŏn territory, namely Lelang, Lintun and Zhenfan. The next year the Han empire established the Xuantu commandery in the territory of Old Chosŏn's ally Yemaek, thus completing what are now called the four Han commanderies (*Hansagun*). Even before the collapse of Old Chosŏn, the Han empire established the Canghai commandery in 128 BC, taking advantage of the Ye Lord Namnyŏ's opposition to Old Chosŏn's King Ugŏ (右渠王), but this commandery was abolished in 126 BC because of the difficulties in administering it. In 82 BC, Zhenfan was absorbed into Lelang, and Lintun was absorbed into Xuantu. In 75 BC, the Xuantu commandery, under attack from indigenous groups, had its capital moved to Liaodong. The area of the abolished Lintun commandery, which had up to that point been administered by Xuantu, was placed under Lelang control, and was controlled by a commandant of the Eastern Section (東部都尉 *Dongbu duwei*) based in Lelang. In 204 AD, Gongsun Kang combined the seven districts in Lelang south of the district *Dunyuhyeon* (屯有縣) that had been

under the administration of the commandant of the Southern Section and placed them under a newly-established Daifang commandery. Later, Lelang and Daifang both were weakened by the collapse of the Western Jin empire which had controlled them, and Koguryŏ took advantage of this situation to take over Lelang in 313 AD and Daifang in 314 AD. Xuantu had to shift to new territory twice because of attacks from indigenous groups. It was controlled, along with Liaodong commandery, first by the Wei empire and then the Jin empire, before it passed into the control of the Yan state ruled by the Murong Xianbei. In 319 AD, it fell to Kwanggaet'o, the expansionist monarch of Koguryŏ.

Including Canghai, Lelang, Zhenfan, Lintun, Xuantu and Daifang, there were a total of six commanderies established by the China-based Han empire with the purpose of controlling Old Chosŏn and the Yemaek. Because Canghai, Zhenfan and Lintun existed for fairly brief periods, discussion of Han commanderies usually focuses on the Lelang commandery, with some reference to Xuantu and Daifang. The book being reviewed here deals with all six commanderies, but the emphasis is very much on Lelang. Reflecting the importance of Lelang, six out of ten chapters are focused on Lelang.

The Han commanderies were the base from which the Han empire of the Chinese central plain expanded into and controlled Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. Additionally, they acted as the window through which the culture, technology and scholarship of the Chinese central plain spread into Eastern Yi (東夷) society. The Han commanderies encouraged a preference for opulent Han goods among the indigenous leaders of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula as a means for such leaders to secure political power. The importance of Han goods to indigenous leaders is well portrayed through the fact that when Pyŏnhan and Chinhan had difficulties importing mirrors from Han (*hangyŏng*), Lelang responded by producing imitations of Han mirrors (*pangjegyŏng*) for export, signifying that the Han commanderies meant to bring indigenous leaders of the Eastern Yi society under their control.

At the same time, the indigenous leaders of Eastern Yi society had no choice but to vie for power in the context of general domination by the Han commanderies. Koguryŏ developed as a state by merging with neighbouring groups. This development may also been seen in Koguryŏ's use of *Chaekguru* (幘溝婁 cap fort) to unify its window of interaction with the Xuantu Commandery and seize a position of dominance in foreign affairs. The growth of Koguryŏ and other indigenous polities, which is expressed in the sources as "invasions by barbarians" (夷貊所侵 *imaek sochim*), necessitated the abolition of Zhenfan and Lintun commanderies, the relocation of Xuantu commandery, and the reorganization of Lelang commandery through the establishment of commandants for the southern and eastern regions.

Viewed from this perspective, the establishment of the Han commanderies was of considerable import for the development of the early states of the Korean peninsula. Our understanding of the Han commanderies has a significant bearing on how we conceptualize the formation process of the early states. Thus, the publication of *The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History* is of great historical significance. The book provides a general survey of scholarly discussion concerning the Han commanderies with a focus on South Korean scholarship. The publication of this scholarship in English is a valuable contribution, as it brings this work beyond the confines of South Korean academia to Anglophone researchers.

The Early Korea Project has been organized under the direction of Mark E. Byington of Harvard University's Korea Institute with the support of the Northeast Asia History Foundation (henceforward NAHF). The project has published the following books as part of its regular series: *Early Korea, Volume 1: Reconsidering Early Korea through Archaeology* (2008), *Early Korea, Volume 2: The Samhan Period of Korean History* (2009), and *Early Korea, Volume 3: The Rediscovery of Kaya in History and Archaeology* (2011). Additionally, the Early Korea Project has an occasional series, for which it published *State and Society*

in Middle and Late Silla in 2010, as well as *The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History* and *New Perspectives on Korean Art: From Silla to Koryŏ*, both in 2013.

The contents of *The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History* are as follows:

Notably, in a book translated for an English speaking readership, the preface is immediately followed by a section entitled "Conventions

for Classical Citations." This section aids the reader by providing accurate bibliographic information for frequently cited Chinese histories, such as *Guanzi, Shiji*, *Hanshu* and *Hou Hanshu*, as well as Korean histories such as the *Samguk yusa* and the *Samguk sagi*. Also the index at the end of the book uses English, Chinese characters, and where necessary, Korean characters Hangeul, allowing the reader to gain an accurate understanding of how key terms were translated. This is truly useful, not only for English-speaking readers, but for Korean readers as well. Hence, this book's indexing arrangement seems worthy of becoming a standard for English-language translations of Korean papers concerning early Korean history in the future, and even abstracts of such papers.

A total of nine authors, including Byington, contributed papers to the book. Seven are South Koreans, but there is also one Japanese scholar, Lee Sungsi, and of course, there is Byington himself. This may be said to be a pretty balanced selection. In terms of research subjects, the contributing authors are specialists in such diverse fields as Old Chosŏn, Lelang, Koguryŏ, and early Chinese history, but most are scholars strongly associated with research on Old Chosŏn and the Han commanderies. Moreover, each of the contributing authors has at least 25 years of experience in their area, which well vouches for their credibility to be included in the book's selection of authors.

Moving on to a brief consideration of each chapter, the first titled "Scholarly Studies on the Han Commanderies in Korea" by Oh Youngchan and Mark E. Byington criticizes the tendency, associated especially with the Japanese colonial period, to see the Han commanderies as an earlier version of the colonialism of the twentieth century. Instead, the authors, in an objective and scholarly manner, reconsider the role played by the Han commanderies both on the Korean peninsula in particular and in East Asia as a whole. They introduce key textual sources for the Han commanderies, notably the *Samguk sagi*, the *Samguk yusa*, the *Shiji*, the *Sanguozhi* and the *Zizhi tongjian*. They also

describe archaeological sources such as the Stele of the Spirit Shrine of Nianti District, Lelang census documents and various types of seals (印章 *injang*), including clay document seals (封泥 *pongni*). Following this, the chapter surveys the broad trends of Japanese colonial-era scholarship, as well as scholarship in North Korea, South Korea and Japan post-1945.

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the book by providing the broad outlines of scholarship on the Han commanderies to an Anglophone readership. Noteworthy is the particular indication of distortions in research carried out by official scholars within the Japanese colonial apparatus as such scholars linked the Han commanderies with Japan's own colonial project in Korea. While they allow that, post-liberation, Korean scholars have had some success overcoming this tendency as part of a general critique of colonial-era scholarship, the authors are nonetheless concerned about a remaining tendency to equate the two very different historical periods. Considering that some Western scholars still uncritically repeat Japanese colonial scholarship, it is very meaningful indeed that these new understandings of the Han commanderies, and the recent objective scholarship concerning the Han commanderies, are being offered in English.

If the first chapter provides the broad introductory framework, the discussion of particular themes begins with the second chapter. Chapter 2, "Old Chosŏn - Its History and Archaeology" by Song Ho Jung, is a discussion of the history and geography of the state of Old Chosŏn that the Han commanderies replaced. Distinguishing Old Chosŏn into two periods, an early period (8th-5th centuries BC) and a later period (4th-2nd centuries BC), Song Ho Jung explores the historical and archaeological evidence related to both. As a matter of particular dispute is the distinction between Bronze Age culture in Liaoxi and Liaodong; Song considers only the latter to be part of Old Chosŏn culture.

Chapter 3, "The History of Lelang Commandery" by Kwon O-jung, discusses the circumstances surrounding the establishment, abolition and relocations of the various commanderies, with a focus on Lelang,

although he also discusses the establishment of Daifang and the collapse of both Lelang and Daifang. The chapter may be said to provide a general history of the Han commanderies with a focus on Lelang. It can also be seen as providing a preliminary and comprehensive discussion to prepare the reader for the diverse topics discussed in later chapters.

Chapter 4, "The Ruling Class of Lelang Commandery" by Oh Young-chan, argues that indigenous culture continued to be dominant until the first century BC. He points out that, as government of the region by the commanderies prolonged into the first and second centuries AD, indigenous groups began to assume Han culture, resulting in the development of a new culturally hybrid community of Nangnang people.[1] Chapter 5, "The Material Culture of the Lelang Commandery" by Jung In-seung, explores archaeologically the earth fortresses, graves, pottery and other aspects of Lelang culture, and analyzes in detail the influence of Lelang culture on the indigenous groups on the fringes of the commanderies.

Chapters 6 to 8 discuss the relationships between the Han commanderies and the Samhan, Ye, Wa, Koguryŏ, and other peoples surrounding the commanderies. Chapter 6, "The Samhan, Ye, Wa and the Time of the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies" by Lee Sungsi focuses on explicating the relationships formed by Lelang and Daifang with the petty states of the Samhan, the Ye of the Korean peninsula and environs, and of the Wa in the Japanese archipelago. The study approaches the role the Han commanderies played in the growth of these peoples from a perspective that encompasses East Asia as a whole. Because the chapter's author Lee Sungsi is a Japanese scholar studying early Korean history, his opinions are especially noteworthy. Chapter 7, "The Fall of Lelang and the Daifang Commanderies and Its Aftermath" by Yeo HoKyu,

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[1] Translator's note: Nangnang is the Korean pronunciation of Lelang. I follow the book in referring to the group as Nangnang people to reflect Oh Young-chan's concept of indigenized Chinese and Sinified indigenous elites within the Han commanderies.

investigates the developments in the governance of the Korean peninsula's northwestern region throughout the expulsion of Lelang and Daifang by Koguryŏ. The author discusses how, after the collapse of the commanderies, Koguryŏ actively accepted émigrés of Chinese origin in order to strengthen its control over the region. Chapter 8, "Koguryŏ and the Reorganization of the Xuantu Commandery" by Lee Seongje, departs somewhat from the received opinion that the Xuantu Commandery's first relocation was due to the attacks by Koguryŏ. Lee emphasizes that Koguryŏ was not controlled by the Han commanderies in the period immediately following their initial establishment. "Koguryŏ's invasions" were in fact part of a process whereby Koguryŏ, as an exterior force, invaded the territory of the commanderies, forcing their reorganization. Establishment of the Chaekguru fortress, a base for trade and diplomacy with Koguryŏ, was a difficult concession for Xuantu Commandery in the face of Koguryŏ's active campaign for expansion. This chapter's value lies in being primarily concerned with Xuantu as opposed to a majority of other chapters tilted toward Lelang.

Chapter 9, "Lelang Commandery and Han China's Commandery-based Rule" by Kim Byung-joon, uses recently excavated wood and bamboo strips and tablets to compare the governance of the Han commanderies in China proper with that in Lelang. Kim argues against the scholarly consensus that Lelang, as a border commandery, was governed differently from commanderies in the central regions of the empire, and claims that Lelang experienced much the same system of governance as did other regions in the Han empire. By comparing the Lelang commandery with other commanderies, both in the core regions and the frontiers of the Han, and thus exploring Lelang within a broader East Asian context, the meaning of Kim's study can be found in looking at Lelang's governance system in a different light.

Chapters 2 to 9 either summarize previously published work by their authors or are in fact translations of works previously published in Korean that underwent revision. By contrast, the last chapter, "Historical

Geography of the Han Commanderies in Korea" by the editor Mark E. Byington, introduces previously unpublished analysis. Since Yi Pyŏng-do's work on the historical geography of the Han commanderies, the South Korean scholarly community has hardly revisited the question of the location of the Han commanderies. Considering the recent excavation of a large number of texts and archaeological artifacts, perhaps as a matter of course there should have been a comprehensive reconsideration, but this has not been attempted, in part because such a reconsideration would require an enormous amount of work, and in truth, because such a project was seen as somewhat passé and unexciting. As a result, scholars have largely satisfied themselves with making small revisions to Yi Pyŏng-do's conclusions. From this perspective, Byington's historical geography of the Han commanderies, beginning with Canghai and including Daifang, is all the more meaningful. Byington's subjects the historical evidence to an objective and rational investigation in order to determine the location of the Han commanderies.

3. Critical Considerations and Suggestions

The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History cannot be expected to encompass all the work done, and all the sources discovered on the subject. Nevertheless, the nine scholars and ten chapters together introduce the key implications and research contributions of recent scholarship on the Han commanderies. This clearly was also the intention of the editor, and is in accord with the broader aims of the Early Korea Project funded by NAHF. The reviewer of this book acknowledges the overall progress the Early Korea Project has made, but with the hope of encouraging even greater success in the future, would like to point out a number of problems and make a number of suggestions.

On page 11, the first paragraph of the first chapter outlines the overall purpose and direction of research on the Han commanderies in

South Korea:

> The Han commanderies established in the last-second century B.C. under Emperor Wu (r. 141 B.C.-87 B.C.) played an important role in the development of societies and polities in the Korean peninsula, southern Manchuria, and Japan. Their establishment disrupted the course of social and political development of the regions in and around their spheres of authority, and their presence triggered significant changes in the social structures and cultures of the peoples who populated those regions. Although these commanderies have often been understood as colonial outposts of the Han empire, it is clear that such a description fails to capture the political and cultural complexities involved when a state-level polity imposes itself upon societies of a less complex order and attempts to establish an equilibrium such that optimal control is maintained at minimal expense. Nevertheless, the specter of twentieth-century colonialism has caused scholars in East Asia to view the Han commanderies in Korea and southern Manchuria in starkly simplistic terms as mechanisms for Chinese colonial control of the Korean peninsula. In recent decades, however, as the colonial experience of the first half of the twentieth century fades into the past, scholarship in East Asia has begun to explore the more nuanced aspects of the Han commanderies and the role they played in the history of northeast Asia and, particularly, the Korean peninsula.

The paragraph is critical of established scholarly methods that understood the Han commanderies by linking them to colonial rule. Instead, it encourages a more objective approach to research on the Han commanderies that is free from the colonial perspectives of the early twentieth-century. However, even without taking a nationalist perspective or mentioning Korea's painful experience of having been under colonial rule by Japan during the early twentieth-century, it cannot be denied that the Han commanderies were a clear example of Eastern Yi society being

dominated by a foreign people of the Han (or Chinese) empire. It is true that official scholars of the Japanese empire intentionally emphasized the period of Han commandery rule to equate Japan's colonial rule of Korea with the Han commanderies' domination of Old Chosŏn and the Yemaek. Of course, we must endeavour to understand this period objectively. But to understand why Koguryŏ struggled so vigorously to drive out the Han commanderies, we must reconsider carefully the role and character of the Han commanderies in the development of ancient states.

Secondly, in the survey of earlier scholarly works in the first chapter, the authors mention on pages 31-32 the research done by the *sirhak* (evidential learning) scholars of late Chosŏn,[2] with the actual scholars themselves, including Han Paek-kyŏm, Yi Ik, An Chŏng-bok, Chŏng Yag-yong and Han Ch'i-yun, mentioned in a footnote. Lee Byeong Do is cited for Korean scholarship amid Japan's colonial rule. This is then followed by an introduction in detail on the research and excavation activities of official scholars of Japanese origin during the Japanese colonial period. Of course, the book is primarily concerned with research during and after the twentieth century, but for a survey of earlier research, it rather seems that the work of the *sirhak* scholars is passed over too quickly.

It is clear that scholarship on the Han commanderies during the Japanese colonial period was dominated by official government scholars of Japanese origin. However, by limiting mention of Korean scholarly contributions during the colonial period to Yi Pyŏng-do, the book downplays excessively the scope of Korean scholarship during that period. The era saw, in addition to empiricist scholars such as Yi Pyŏng-

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[2] Translator's note: The Chosŏn dynasty (A.D. 1392-1910) was named after the state of Chosŏn that was conquered by the Han empire in 108 B.C. The two are now distinguished by calling the earlier state "Old Chosŏn." The more recent Chosŏn is conventionally divided into early and late periods (other scholars divide it into early, middle, and late periods), although precise definition of these periods vary. Broadly speaking, late Chosŏn refers to the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

do, nationalist historians such as Pak Ŭn-sik, Sin Ch'ae-ho, Chŏng In-bo and An Chae-hong, who most certainly engaged in considerable scholarship on the Han commanderies. It is unfortunate that there was no explication of this aspect of Korean scholarship during the Japanese colonial period.

Thirdly, the book is too focused on Lelang. It is true that, of the Han commanderies, Lelang played a key role. However, although Xuantu commandery played a considerable role in Koguryŏ, Puyŏ, and Yemaek societies, the book includes only one chapter on Xuantu. In this respect, it is worth noting the significant recent contributions by Zhao Hongmei to the subject through his 2006 doctoral dissertation, "Xuantu-jun yanjiu" (A Study of the Xuantu Commandery) at Northeast Normal University, and two books *Han sijun yanjiu* [A study on the Four Han Commanderies] and *Fuyu yu Xuantu-jun guanxi yanjiu* [A study of the relations between Puyŏ and the Xuantu commandery].[3]

Fourth, let us consider criticisms made by some who have claimed that the book reproduces Japanese colonial historiography by placing Lelang in the area of P'yŏngyang instead of in the Liaoxi region of China. The name Lelang continues to appear in historical sources even after Koguryŏ's expulsion of Lelang from the Korean peninsula. There are references from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period to Lelang commanderies established as mobile commanderies (*qiaojun*) or mobile districts (*qiaoxian*) by the Murong Xianbei state of Former Yan. Yet, these were not originally part of the Lelang commandery, but were commanderies moved around China proper to deal with particular circumstances at the time, and have nothing to do with Korean history.[4]

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[3] Zhao Hongmei, *Han sijun yanjiu* [A Study on the Four Han Commanderies] (Xianggang: Xianggang Yazhou chubanshe, 2008); Zhao Hongmei, *Fuyu yu Xuantu-jun guanxi yanjiu* [A Study of the Relations between Puyŏ and the Xuantu Commandery] (Xianggang: Xianggang Yazhou chubanshe, 2009).

[4] Sŏ Yŏng-su, "Daeoe kwan'gye esŏ pon Nangnang-gun," *Sahakchi* 31 (1998): 22-26.

In the case of Lelang, it was first moved to the Daling River basin by the Former Yan, and then moved in the early fifth century by the Northern Wei to the Lulong region in the Luan River basin. After being briefly restored in the Daling River basin in the early sixth century, the commandery made its final move toward Baoding near Tianjin. In 583, the Lelang commandery was eliminated as part of a general restructuring of prefectures and commanderies by the Northern Qi.[5] The Lelang commanderies and other commanderies and districts that survived until the end of the sixth century have nothing to do with Korean history. Those independent historians who argue that Lelang and other commanderies were established in Liaoxi and Hebei after the defeat of Old Chosŏn, and that therefore Old Chosŏn was located in those regions of China also, are not taking into account the historical context discussed above.

Finally, some suggestions can be offered about the continued translating and publishing work done by the Early Korea Project. As previously mentioned, the publication of both the regular series and the irregular series are clearly the responsibility of Mark E. Byington, but the funding for the series is provided by the NAHF. Therefore one cannot ignore the influence of NAHF on the series. Meanwhile, the order of the publication and the subjects of publication are bound to have a significant effect on the understanding English-speaking scholars may gain on the subject matter of the series. It is thus unfortunate that, up to this point, there has been no explanation of why the volumes—on subjects as diverse as Silla, Kaya, Samhan and historical archaeology, and so forth—were published in the order that they were. No outline has been provided informing us of the likely order of future publications. As is very well known, Korean history begins with Old Chosŏn. However,

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[5] Ch'ŏn Kwan-u, "Nanha haryu ŭi Chosŏn," *Sach'ong* 21 (1977); Ch'ŏn Kwan-u, "Nanha haryu ŭi Chosŏn," *Sach'ong* 22 (1977); Ch'ŏn Kwan-u, *Chosŏn sŏnsa. Samhansa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1989), 90-135.

The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History discusses the commanderies established by the Han empire after the destruction of Old Chosŏn. Of course, it is well known that the Han commanderies played an important role in Korean history. However, there is also no question that there was a state called Old Chosŏn. In a project funded by the NAHF in order to expand knowledge of early Korean history among English-speaking readers, it would seem obvious for a volume on Old Chosŏn to be published foremost, so it is unfortunate that this was not the case.