

China's Northeast Project and Korean History

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Abstract

Since its adoption of reform and openness policies, Chinese society has been witness to the people's expression of doubt about the socialist regime, economic disparity between the rich and the poor, domestic separatist and independence movements, one initiated by certain ethnic minority groups, and the identity crisis facing Korean-Chinese people. In responding to these, the Chinese government has endeavored to consolidate national and territorial integration, with the ultimate aim of making the minority groups' identity as Chinese nationals secure. This tendency has also been reflected in terms of how history is constructed, and has consolidated a theory of “a unified multiethnic national state.” Moreover, increasing numbers of North Koreans have crossed the Chinese-North Korean border, which Chinese people regard as a prelude to the collapse of the North Korean regime. It was at this point that China began to be concerned about the impact of a changed political climate on the Korean peninsula affecting the social stability of northeast China. The Chinese concerns will become even more serious if North Koreans, along with the collapse of the North Korean regime, increasingly cross the border in the future, and are seen as international refugees. With massive numbers of Yanbian Koreans flowing into the Korean peninsula, northeast China will become a stronghold of Korean nationality.

Concerned about a series of incidents that may come, Chinese government began the Northeast Project in February 2002. Based on the theory of a “unified multiethnic nation-state,” they began to argue that the ancient kingdoms—including the Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae—are included within the rubric of Chinese history, a representation fuelled by the need to prevent the Korean peninsula from exerting an influence on the northeast China area. In short, with the intent of coping with the changed political climate of the Korean peninsula and the change in Northeast Asian international order that would follow, the Northeast Project can be understood as a Chinese strategy in response to the situation on the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia.

Keywords: Northeast Project, Goguryeo, Yanbian Korean, borderlands, Gando, territory, multi-ethnic

Introduction

With the Chinese government's policies of political reform and openness, the Chinese people have become aware of the status of China, in particular, its underdeveloped status in the international order. In the meantime, a significant number of Chinese people have come to doubt the legitimacy of the socialist regime. A series of reform policies have also aggravated economic disparities between the more advanced southeast region and the less developed inland region. Ethnic minority groups (Uighur in Xinjiang and Tibetans) residing mainly in the inland regions are aware of their economic deprivation, coupled with their cultural and religious differences. As a result, they have made evident their feelings of discontent toward and isolation from the Han Chinese and the Chinese government. Moreover, some ethnic minority groups have even initiated movements for independence from China, galvanized by their resentment for the persecution they suffered during the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, Yanbian Koreans, whose numbers are estimated at ten million, have held demonstrations to demand that the discrimination they face be addressed through the legislation of a special act concerning overseas Koreans, along with a campaign to regain their nationality. Korean-Chinese people who returned to China after a five to six year stay in Korea were predisposed to identify themselves as Korean, as they were already accustomed to the Korean way of life and value system. A significant number of them revealed a dualistic, contradictory attitude toward Korea, incorporating both dissatisfaction and aspirations. Also, many Yanbian Koreans watch Korean television programs (news and dramas) through satellite broadcasting. In a word, they have lived in China while remaining emotionally and consciously geared to Korean society. It is a sign that the identity of Yanbian Koreans has been unstable and that they might side with Korea, depending upon changes in the political climate of the peninsula.

In Northeast China, approximately 200,000 North Korean refugees are seeking new lives with the aid of relatives and friends. These refugees seem to exert some influence on the identity of Yanbian Koreans, whose nationality is Chinese. That is, Yanbian Koreans seem to experience a heightened sense of Korean national identity

when they meet North Korean refugees.

Since the 20th century, both North and South Korean students have learned that Korean history includes the history of ancient kingdoms, such as Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae, in the middle and northern parts of the Korean peninsula and northeast China. Also, some Koreans who visit China spread among Yanbian Koreans the Korean irredentism, that is, efforts to recover those parts of Manchuria that were once part of ancient Korea. In recent years, we have witnessed a campaign to nullify the Gando agreement, which was concluded between Imperial Japan and the Qing Dynasty, along with an increased number of organizations and news coverage arguing that Gando is Korean territory. In addition, North Korea attempted to register its Goguryeo remains as a UNESCO World Heritage in 2003. If North Korea's Goguryeo site were given World Heritage status, then China would have no choice but to recognize Goguryeo cultural sites within Chinese territory as belonging to North Korea.

In this context, the Chinese government became aware of the need to impose stronger domestic control over ethnic minority groups, thereby making firm their identity as Chinese nationals and completing national and territorial integration. Towards this aim, the Chinese government had already begun implementation of the Grand West Development plan for the region in which Uighur and Tibetans are living. It has also pushed the Northeast Project¹, as well as the Northeast Development Strategy², for the Northeast region where Yanbian Koreans are concentrated.

When Chinese projects, including the Northeast Project, are connected at the state level to the question of ethnic minorities and the land upon which they are living, a clear understanding of the Chinese government's views of nation and territory, as well as its historical viewpoint and ruling ideology based on statism, is urgently needed. Chinese theorists of nationhood accept Stalin's definition of "nation." Stalin defined "nation" as a historically stable community of people, which shares a common vernacular language, occupies a single territory, has an integrated, coherent economy, and possesses a shared psychological make-up.³ In other words, they understand the concept of nation as a historical category and believe that individual nations have their own history "from birth, to formation, to development, and to dissolution."⁴

In today's China, the unique concept of a "Chinese nation" has been widely diffused. That is, the Chinese nation is understood as one formed within the frame of

¹ Its original, full name is the "research project that aims to continue to study the history and situation of the Northeast borderlands." For organizations that participate in the project, see Yi (2004, 10).

² For more details, see Feng (2004); <http://www.hebei.com.cn>; <http://www.nova.gov.cn/showdoc/>.

³ Stalin (1953-1956, 2:294).

⁴ Shi (1984, 57).

“multicultural unity of Chinese nation.” It was formed when individual nations experienced interethnic migration and fusion, adopted other traditions, and exploited their borderlands, thereby enriching Chinese culture and jointly confronting foreign aggression through national cohesiveness. Thus, the concept of the Chinese nation includes not only the Han Chinese and minority ethnic groups living in contemporary Chinese territory, but all ethnic groups that ever lived within Chinese territory.⁵ Furthermore, the concept of the Chinese nation is not so much a historical reality as an imagined community or a constructed, visionary nation, invented to accommodate the needs of modern China.⁶

China has defined itself as a “unified multi-ethnic nation-state,” because it formed a unified state with the inclusion of many different ethnic groups. According to this theory, all ethnic societies that existed or exist within modern Chinese territory played a role in forming the historical community of China to some degree. Thus, they are all Chinese nations, and the dynasties established by them are of Chinese origin. This includes the claim that the territory ruled by each dynasty constituted Chinese territory. A theory of a “unified multi-ethnic nation-state” is based on a historical perception that is closely linked to China’s contemporary views of territory, nation, state, and history. In a word, it is an invented, inflated historical point of view exploited by Chinese government for the needs of the “here and now.”

On the basis of the above-mentioned theory, the Communist Party of China emphasized the national equality and grand unity of nations while espousing the belief that the inclusion of each nation within China would guarantee the success of the socialist project. In particular, when independence movements were mounting among minority groups following Chinese policies of political reform and openness, the Chinese government realized that adversarial forces in the West were trying to exploit the problems of ethnicity and religion in order to westernize and divide China.⁷ Consequently, after presupposing strengthened national unity, national unification, and social stability to be a common aspiration for and a fundamental interest⁸ of all ethnic groups within China, the government ruled that they were principles of action⁹ for

⁵ Tian (2001); Jo (1988); Feng (1997, 52); Fei (1989, 11). Regarding the inclusion of ancient ethnic societies within the territory of modern China, Chinese theorists of nationhood strongly argue that those societies laid the foundation for contemporary China by developing the land and contributing greatly to Chinese history.

⁶ Yoon (2004, 117).

⁷ Gong (2001, 10). Kim B. (1997, 31-32).

⁸ *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), September 30, 1999.

⁹ 新時期統一戰線文獻選編 (續編), *Xinshiji tongyi zhanxian wenxuanbian*(Selected Documents on United Front in the New Age) 中共中央黨校出版社 Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1997, 647-649 頁, 653 頁, 757 頁.

every Chinese person to obey.

Therefore, China, a multi-ethnic state, strengthened patriotic education throughout the country in order to maintain the socialist regime through national unity and social stability.¹⁰ Patriotism is an integral, ideological part of building a socialist spiritual civilization.¹¹ The Chinese theory of a multi-ethnic state was necessarily a product of national unity and patriotism, as the latter always strengthens the former. Thus, the Chinese view of nation and the state-centered view of history heavily influence interpretations of the origins and attributes of the diverse nations that existed in Manchuria in the past.”

Currents and Details of the Northeast Project

It is at this point that it would be most appropriate to inspect both process and the details of the Northeast Project. In 1983, the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography (RCCBHG, *Zhongguo Bianjiang Shidi Yanjiu Zhongxin*)¹² was established to fully assume the study of history and geography of the Chinese borderland¹³ under the direct control of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Supported by Chinese central and local policy institutions and based on a project conducted by the Yunnan Institute (*Zhongguo Bianjiang Diqu Lishi Yu Shehui Yanjiu Yunnan Gongzuozhan*), the research center organized the Northeast Institute (*Zhongguo Bianjiang Diqu Lishi Yu Shehui Yanjiu Dongbeizhan*)¹⁴ in 1999. After being ratified by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the CASS and three provincial authorities in the Northeast region jointly organized the Northeast Project and began the project in February 2002. The Northeast Project, which is to be carried out over the span of five years, is an extensive one that will cover various

¹⁰ Yoon (2002, 269-301).

¹¹ Yoon (Dec 2000).

¹² In China, the concept of borderland is interpreted as the “specific territory that lies along the national border.” Ma and Liu (1998, 2). For the Chinese perception and concept of the borderland, see Yoon (2004, 46-70).

¹³ Basic research topics include the modern Chinese border, Chinese ancient domains, and the Chinese history of borderlands. Applied research topics include research on the points at issue concerning the contemporary Chinese borderland, countermeasures to borderland issues, and predictions of future directions. Currently, 19 standing members work for the center and are assisted by three administrative staff. Li Sheng serves as head, Li Guoqiang as assistant head. The center consists of several departments, including the departments of research 1, research 2, editing, general affairs, Internet information, and a library. Also, academic committees are organized separately. For further information, refer to <http://www.cass.net.cn/webnew/yanjiusuo/bjzx>.

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disciplines, regions, and fields.

The CASS and the public relations departments of the three provincial communist party's committees in the Northeast region created an **controlling organization to direct cooperation for the Northeast Project (Dongbei Gongcheng Lingdao Xiezu Jigou)** in 2002, with Li Tieying, a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and president of the CASS in 2002,¹⁵ and Xiang Huaicheng, minister of finance and member of the CCCPC in 2002, serving as advisors. Under the **controlling organization to direct cooperation, core section for directing the Northeast Project (Dongbei Gongcheng Lingdao Xiaozhu)** was formed with Wang Luolin, a member of the CCCPC and vice president of the CASS in 2002, serving as director. There are four associate directors in the **core section**: Yang Guanghong, Quan Zhezhu, Zhao Xinliang, and Ma Dazheng, director of the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography in 2002. Li Sheng serves as secretary-general. Under the **core section**, there is a committee of experts made up of members affiliated with various academic institutions, including the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography, the Institute for Ethnic Groups (**Minzu Yanjiusuo**), Institute for Archaeology (**Kaogu Yanjiusuo**), Bureau of Scientific Research (**Kexue Yanjiuju**), Institute of Qing History at Renmin University, Academy of Social Sciences in Heilongjiang Province, Public Relations in Heilongjiang Province, Academy of Social Sciences in Jilin province, and Academy of Social Sciences in Liaoning Province. Also, many researchers are working for administrative office for the Northeast Project, an umbrella organization of **a committee of experts**.

Several characteristics of the organizational structure of the Northeast Project deserve mention. First, while studies and activities for other borderlands are conducted mainly by the research institute alone, it is worth noting that not only all umbrella organizations of the CASS, but the administrative organization, the communist party, related research institutes, universities, and academies of social sciences participate in the project. Second, many influential politicians have been involved in the project, including a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC), a minister of finance and member of the CCCPC, and either assistant secretaries or vice-governors of each provincial committee in 2002. From this, it can be interpreted that the Chinese central government and high governmental officials in the northeast area have a great interest in the Northeast Project.

The Northeast Project is categorized into three sectors: research, including basic

¹⁵ At the end of 2004, Chen Kueiyuan, vice-chairperson of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, assumed the presidency of the CASS.

and applied; the translation of foreign materials (mainly from North and South Korea); and the collection of primary historical resources. Basic research refers to the study of historical and academic theories. Applied research signifies the analysis of several problems that stem from actual international relations-- particularly, the changing political climate of the Korean peninsula and its impact on Northeast security--and Chinese responses to these problems. Applied research is conducted behind closed doors, since it is closely connected to issues related to changes in the East Asian international order, Chinese policy towards the Korean peninsula, and Chinese political strategy for East Asia, which makes it impossible to discuss the topics and themes in detail. The publicized information is the annual list of basic research subjects, as can be seen in Table 1.

As for the Northeast Project's basic research, projects include the following research topics: 1) theories regarding ancient Chinese territory, 2) the Northeast region, 3) ethnic groups in the Northeast region, 4) Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae, 5) the history of Korean-Chinese relations, 6) strategies for social stability in the Northeast borderland, 7) the changed political climate on the Korean peninsula and its impact on Northeast security, 8) politico-economic relations between the Chinese Northeast borderland and Russia's far eastern regions, and 9) applied research.¹⁶ With the exception of some studies on Russia, almost every single study focuses on North and South Korea.

Table 1. Subjects of Basic Research in the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography by Year

		Research Projects
2002	Basic projects (27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General history of Heilongjiang - Chinese northeast borderland culture during the 20th century - The Tombstone of King Gwangaeto - History of Balhae - Gija and Gija Joseon - Theories regarding Balhae history - Development history of the ancient people in the Chinese northeast area - A study of the Origins of Related Surnames in Korea and China - A Brief history of Goguryeo

¹⁶ This description is based on the research projects and Northeast Project guidelines available through the research center's [web](#) site.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International law and the Korean-Chinese border dispute; - Commentaries on the <i>Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> - History and culture of the Baekdusan area and the issue of its jurisdiction - Control over immigrants to Balhae and the jurisdiction of Balhae - Goguryeo historical sites south of the Yalu river - Conflict and Exchange in Manchuria under the puppet regime - International immigration into northeast China - History of the Han Chinese Population in the northeast area - Cultural exchange and fusion among multi ethnic groups on the Northeast borderland - Local governance in the Chinese northeast area under the Republic of China - Establishment of Ethnic group districts in northeast China area - Successive Chinese dynasties' control over northeast China - Fortresses and military strongholds during Qing China - Thoughts concerning control over northeast China - Containment and development of the Yalu river during Qing China - History of economic relations between the Chinese northeast and Russia - Immigration in eastern Russia - Chinese people in the Russian far east
	Applied projects 8 projects	Confidential
	Translation (14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Treatise on Old Joseon and Balhae by North and South Korean historians - Studies of Goguryeo in North and South Korean academia - Study of Balhae history by overseas historians - Significant works and materials written in Korean: - Translation of Selected materials of the Baeksan Archive - History of Chinese Korean Borderland History - Current status of the Korean peninsula - Comparative economic and social studies of North and South Koreans - Strategy and plans for eastern development in 21st century Russia - The Chinese people in the Amur valley area - Treaty and stipulation already confirmed - Russo-Chinese and Soviet Russian-Chinese economic trade - Chinese laborers residing in the Far east Russia in the era of Capitalism - The Archaeological remains of the Jorgen in the Daheixiazi island
	Compilation (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Selected archives of Northeast borderland history, - collection of archives of Hunchun government offices - Selected archives of Northeast borderland history (volume on Liaoning) - Selected archives of Northeast borderland history (volume on J

		ilin) - Selected archives of Northeast borderland history (volume on Heilongjiang)
2003	Basic projects (15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Theories of “state,” “territory,” and the “national boundary” - Views of neighboring ethnic groups and states in ancient China and its modern transformation - Subordinate states and the tributary system during the feudal age - The Formation and transformation of the Chinese northeast area transition - Current status of the Balhae historical sites - Issue of “Gando” (Jiando) - Research and study of Northeast borderland geography in Japan and Russia - Immigration and immigration policy in the northeast - Chinese Perceptions of the northeast area and borderland societies during the Ming and Qing dynasties - Study of overreaching nation in Northeast borderland - History, origin, and culture of Old Joseon - Origins of ancient civilization in the Korean peninsula - The State and people on the Korean peninsula - A Comparative study of the Chinese ethnic group policy of the northeast and Russian far east regions
	Applied projects	Confidential
	Translation (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant works and materials written in Japanese - Significant works and materials written in Western language
	Compilation (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical materials regarding the Northeast borderlands - Collection of Maps of the Northeast borderlands - Historical atlas of the Northeast borderlands
2004	Basic projects (15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Theories of “state,” “territory,” and “national boundary” - Views of neighboring ethnic groups and states in ancient China and its modern transformation - Subordinate states and the tributary system during the feudal age - The Formation and transformation of the Chinese northeast area - Territory, exchange, and Treaties along the Chinese northeast borderland - Immigration and immigration policy in the northeast - Chinese Perceptions of the northeast area and borderland societies during the Ming and Qing dynasties - History, origin, and culture of Old Joseon - A study of the origins and migration of Goguryeo nation - A study of the origins and migration of Balhae nation - The Origins of ancient civilization in the Korean peninsula - States and people on the Korean peninsula - A Comparative study of ethnic group policy of the Chinese northeast and Russian far east regions
	Applied	Confidential

서식 있음: 글머리 기호 및 번호 매기기

	projects	
2004	Basic research (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The five capitals of Balhae during the Tang dynasty - Yuan-Goryeo relations - The “northern advance” policy and the Gando issue during the Joseon dynasty - Communication and frontier administration of the Northeast borderland during Qing dynasty - Policy regarding immigration to the Chinese Northeast region during the Qing dynasty - Russian academic history and research findings on Balhae historical remains and the study of historical literature

It is worth examining the historical and academic justifications behind the Northeast Project. For this, the research center’s Web site offers one starting point for understanding official Chinese interpretations of Goguryeo history.¹⁷ While defining Goguryeo as a local regime set up by an ethnic group in the borderland, the Chinese interpretation argues that Goguryeo grew out of the territory belonging to the Xuantu Commandery of the Western Han and as such existed within the boundaries of the Chinese nation. Therefore, if the Goguryeo people were actually subjects of China, then the Goguryeo remains and relics that have been excavated in the Northeast region do not belong to the Goryeo dynasty of the Wang family, but to China.

According to the Chinese argument, Goguryeo was the product of the joint efforts of the Buyeo people who moved south along with other ethnic groups, including the Yemaek, Han, Xianbei, and Sushen peoples, who had resided within the territory of Goguryeo Xian in West Han. China argues, therefore, that as Goguryeo people are regarded as having resided in the borderlands of the Chinese nation, they do not have any connection to the Korean nation. It is argued that this is the case for political elites as well. Moreover, Goguryeo was, during the early days, under the direct control of the Western Han, according to the Chinese argument, which goes on to conclude that because the Goguryeo people were active in places that came under the jurisdiction of successive Chinese dynasties, Tang dynasty “unified” Goguryeo.¹⁸ Consequently, it is concluded that the Goguryeo people cannot be considered part of the Korean nation.

Though Goguryeo’s center of activity (mainly the capital) moved outside of Chinese territory (Pyeongyang in the Korean peninsula) during the kingdom’s latter

¹⁷ The followings are quoted from the “issue of Goguryeo” on the research center’s website.

¹⁸ The term “unified” is used here to point out that as Sui, Tang, and Goguryeo dynasties all belong to the Chinese nation, the war was not a “war of conquest” between different nations but a “war of unification” between identical ethnic groups. www.gmw.com.cn. *Bianzhong* is a pseudonym invented for three Chinese scholars of the center to justify their arguments.

period, it never moved outside the influence of the Han Chinese commanderies (located in an area of the Korean peninsula which was at one point colonized by the Han people). Goguryeo continued to maintain tributary relations with successive dynasties, and it neither existed outside China nor severed its relationship with China. Furthermore, some Goguryeo people, such as Ko Seon-ji and Gao Zianzhi, were distinguished for their might on the battlefield, as they fought to achieve the unification of the Chinese fatherland.

After the kingdom's collapse, most Goguryeo people were absorbed and merged into the Han Chinese. When the population of the kingdom reached approximately seven hundred thousand people, three hundred thousand moved to the Chinese Central Plains and were gradually absorbed into the Han Chinese. One hundred thousand surrendered to and were captured by Silla, while another hundred thousand exiled themselves first to Balhae, then to Jurgen in the Jin period, and then to the Han Chinese following the collapse of the Jin dynasty. The rest were absorbed into the Tujue.

Finally, China claims that there is no connection between the kingdoms of Goguryeo, which was founded by Ko Jumong, and Goryeo, which was founded by Wang Geon. Chinese scholars argue that the reason the name Goryeo, rather than Goguryeo, began to appear in historical documents was that Goguryeo people or historians from the Sui and Tang dynasties habitually referred to the kingdom as "Goryeo," an abbreviation of "Goguryeo." They add that Chinese people nowadays view the two kingdoms as one body only because the kingdoms' names found in the Chinese historiographies are so similar. It is further argued, however, that Goguryeo, unlike the public perception, did not have any connection with Goryeo, and that Goryeo never spread its influence beyond the Korean peninsula. Consequently, Chinese scholars point out that because there are fundamental difference between the two in terms of chronology, royal surname, and constitution of subjects, one should not confuse Goguryeo with Goryeo. Moreover, they argue that **Goryeo inherited only the territory of Silla Kingdom**, and that its people were from Silla and Baekje, i.e. the Three Han people. They also point to the high possibility that King Taejo of the Goryeo dynasty was a descendant of the Han Chinese in the Leland commandery of the West Han. From this, it can be found that this theory is intended to shake the contemporary Chinese people's historical view that assumes continuity between the two Korean dynasties, Goguryeo and Goryeo.

What Is Behind China's Northeast Project

During the 1950s and 60s, Chinese world history textbooks and works by renowned historians in China described Goguryeo as one of three kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, along with Silla and Baekje; this continued into the early 1980s. However, in terms of Goguryeo history, the mid-1980s saw the emergence of a theory that stated, “**Framework of the Dual Application of Single History**” (*yishi liangyong lun*).¹⁹ In other words, the theory that Goguryeo history falls under the realms of Korean history began to be replaced by the theory that Goguryeo history was part of Chinese history. The latter view was officially sanctioned beginning with the Northeast Project.²⁰ What then lies behind China's Northeast Project that attempts to officially claim Goguryeo belongs within Chinese history. What conditions and strategies inform the Northeast Project?

The website for the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography under the CASS offers information regarding the backdrop against which the Northeast Project has been conducted. Included here are the changed international relations in the northeast region of China (Manchuria) which were caused by Chinese policies of reform and openness, Manchuria's status as a core area in Northeast Asia and its strategic significance, the misrepresentation of historical facts by historians and institutions from countries harboring special interests (especially, North and South Korea), and the confusion generated by politicians who were politically motivated in regards to Goguryeo history.

This viewpoint is vividly demonstrated in the writing of Wang Luolin, **head of core section for directing the Northeast Project** and member of the central committee of the CCP in 2002. He states:

In order to demonstrate that Goguryeo and Balhae, subordinate regimes in the Chinese northeast region, were independent kingdoms built by the ancient Korean people, some North and South Koreans argue that the northeast region of China was under the rule of ancient Koreans. They demand that the land be

¹⁹ The theory can be broken down into two different viewpoints. The first is that while the historical period that predates the relocation of Goguryeo's capital, which was located in an area that currently lies within the borders of China, to Pyeongyang is included in Chinese history, the history of Goguryeo following this move is best categorized as Korean. This is because the center of political activity at that time was located in what is currently the northern part of the Korean peninsula (Sun **Yixue**, 1985; Tan 1991; Zhang 2004, 205). The second viewpoint can be summarized as follows: The greater part of Goguryeo history falls within Chinese history, since three fourths of the Goguryeo people and territory was succeeded by China, compared to only one fourth by Korea (Sun **Jinji**, 2004, 31-41).

²⁰ For more details on this, see Yoon (2004, 319-328).

restored²¹ while escalating the Gando issue--which was only intended to address the current immigration of Koreans within the Yanbian district--into one that calls into question national borders. Moreover, they employ strange logic and use new textbooks and media in order to widely diffuse this logic. In addition, some Russian scholars and local officials seek to distort the history of Sino-Russian relations and spread fear of a “Chinese threat,”²² which can undermine the friendly relations between China and Russia. In recent years, this has had a negative effect on official relations between northeast China and Russian Siberia, and between northeast China and the Far Eastern region. Some Japanese and Western scholars give voice to the same theories as well.²³

The academic background of the Northeast Project is epitomized in the remarks of Quan Zhezhu, a vice-governor of Jilin province in 2002. He argues:

In recent times, some adversarial international forces have tried to penetrate and divide China. They distort and revise history to their advantage, and even try to claim their rights to Chinese territory, under the pretext of conducting academic research and producing scholarship. They exploit the issues of nation and religion to their advantage in order to penetrate China, deride the Chinese people, divide and tempt the nation, and give rise to social and political problems, thereby undermining the integrity of the Chinese territory, as well as its social stability and national unity. This is the reason the CASS and three northeast provinces implemented the Northeast Project, following in the footsteps of the Project for Investigation of Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou Dandai Gongcheng). The project was fueled by the overwhelming interest and support of the committee members of the Communist Party of China and the State Council.²⁴

According to the key people involved, the Northeast Project was implemented as a counteractive, protective measure in response to the attempt of some organizations to bring religious and national division into China and the changed political climate of the Korean peninsula. China’s strategy behind the project can also be confirmed from direct

²¹ This viewpoint is clearly represented in the writing of Jiao Runming (2004, 29-30).

²² It refers to Russians’ attitude toward Chinese, which has arisen due to the flood of Chinese merchandise, Chinese dominance of commerce, and drastic increase in the Chinese residents in Siberia and Maritime Province.

²³ Wang (2003, 4-5).

²⁴ Quan (2003, 8-9).

motivation of the project. According to a report of the Northeast Project Team in 1998 (*Chaoxianbandao Xingshi De Bianhua Dui Dongbei Diqu Wending De Chongji*),²⁵ China selected the issue of Korean political change as a research subject for the second and third projects of contemporary borderlands, out of concern for the consequences of that political change on the northeast region of China, particularly the Yanbian Joseon Ethnic Group Autonomous District, Dandong district, Jilin province, and Liaoning province. The document reveals the fact that the Northeast Project has been directly motivated by the changing political environment of the Korean peninsula.

In the document, a group of experts proposed that China absorb the impact of the changed political climate on the security of the northeast region, in response to the declaration of wartime mobilization facilitated by fears of North Korean nuclear proliferation on March 12, 1997, as well as the influx of North Korean refugees. The document also reveals that some organizations and experts launched a study of the China-North Korea border area within Jilin province from the latter half of 1997, while collecting primary documents on China-Korea relations during the Qing dynasty, which were held by the Jilin Provincial Archive (*Jilinsheng Dang'anguan*). They submitted the working paper to central organizations in order to draw the attention of the Chinese central government, resulting in the implementation of the Northeast Project.

Furthermore, this document indicates that the Northeast Project focuses on 1) a survey of the changed political climate on the Korean peninsula; 2) historically controversial issues between China and North and South Korea, such as the origins of Gija Joseon, Wiman Joseon, Goguryeo, Balhae, the border between Korea and China, Koreans' immigration to Manchuria during the late nineteenth century, and Korean-Chinese people; 3) the study of various issues including opium, religion, and nationhood; and 4) the large-scale influx of North Korean refugees and countermeasures.

In light of the main objectives of the Northeast Project, we can easily surmise that the project is not a mere academic undertaking. China regards the project not only as an academic exercise that is strongly sensitive to political issues, but as an answer to a political question in itself, one that is closely connected to the issues of territory and state sovereignty. As Quan Zhezhu and Wang Luolin, core participants in the Northeast Project, have pointed out, the project is not only relevant on a local level but is related to national concerns regarding Chinese security and stability. It is a critical issue both domestically and internationally.²⁶

What then, are the motives lying behind China's Northeast Project? As seen

²⁵ This information can be found on the research center's website (www.chinaborderland.com) under "Overview of borderlands," "Review of Chinese Borderlands," and "Chinese-Korean borderland in Jilin."

²⁶ Quan (2003, 7-9); Wang (2003, 29-30).

above, when we view the background against which the project has been implemented, as well as the research projects that have been presented by the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography, the strategy of the Northeast Project can be summarized into a list of discrete goals: First, China implemented the project in order to lessen the consequences of future changes in the political climate of the Korean peninsula on the stability of northeast China, and to actively respond to the changed East Asian international order. On the one hand, China was not only trying to prevent the issue of North Koreans crossing over into northeast China from escalating into one of international refugees, but also trying to prevent **Northeast borderland of China** from becoming a Korean stronghold. Also, China was attempting to directly address the changing international order on the Korean peninsula and in the Chinese northeast area, which is also affected by the changing North Korean political regime.

Second, the purpose of the Northeast Project is to apply the theory of “a unified multiethnic nation-state,” stressing the notion of national unity, to the northeast region, thus completing Chinese historical identity. At the same time, its goal is to prevent the deviation and subversion of Korean-Chinese people as Chinese. Minority ethnic groups in the northeast region are thought to instigate other groups, undermining Chinese political security.

Third, while spreading the perception that Manchuria is Chinese territory, not—Korean—and Goguryeo and Balhae belong to Chinese rather than Korean history, China strives to deny the connections between the Korean peninsula and the Chinese northeast region. Through this, China is attempting to hinder any unified Korean influence on Korean-Chinese society and the northeast region, while establishing measures to deal with the Gando issue.²⁷

Fourth, if the theory that Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae all fall under Korean history is maintained, then the Uighur or other Central Asian countries can claim the history of the Western Regions as their own, and Vietnam will be able to place Baiyue and Nanyue **Kingdom** during the period of **Qin-Han** China under the rubric of their own history. China could thus find its history fractured, making it difficult to establish a consistent Chinese historical narrative. The Chinese government, therefore, feels the need to take countermeasures against neighboring countries’ historical claims in order to preserve the historical unity of Chinese history.

²⁷ In recent years, some South Korean groups have argued that the Gando agreement, which was concluded between Imperial Japan and the Qing dynasty, should cease to be valid. According to them, from the perspective of international law, every treaty that Imperial Japan entered into with other countries should have been nullified following the Japanese defeat. Concerning this, see KRF (2004, 117-137) and Kang (2000).

Fifth, China attempted to hinder North Korea in its efforts to register Goguryeo cultural remains as a UNESCO World Heritage in order to eliminate any domestic or international opposition to the theory that Goguryeo history falls under China's history. If North Korea's Goguryeo site were given World Heritage status, then China would have to recognize Goguryeo history as belonging to Korean history, and Goguryeo cultural sites that lie within Chinese territory as belonging to North Korea.

Historiographical Flaws in the Northeast Project

As seen above, China has attempted to develop a logical framework for denying the historical connections between the Korean peninsula and northeast China, but many historical flaws can be found in the framework. First, the Chinese theory of a "unified multi-ethnic nation-state" ignores the fact that the concept of territory, based on national boundaries, only emerged in the modern period and that the description of ancient people's activity, as well as their rise and fall, is also a product of modernity. Is it possible to say that all ancient peoples that emerged and declined within the territory of China can be included in the "imagined nation" or the Chinese nation, which was created entirely from a Chinese-centered perspective? Is it reasonable to argue that all the ethnic groups found in China can be included in the category of "China," an arbitrary one made to accommodate the needs of the modern state? **Is it legitimate to include in Chinese history those ethnic groups whose territory extended beyond the traditional boundary of China?** Did the ancient groups that existed within Chinese territory share the modern sense of ethnic homogeneity or the historical consciousness of succession from preceding dynasties? When we are reminded that nation is a collective consciousness²⁸ made under specific conditions, such as the emergence of print-capitalism and the development of communication, and formed through mutual cognition, the Chinese concept of nation and the Chinese way of categorizing the concept gives rise to many doubts.

China argues that Goguryeo and Balhae were local regimes subject to Chinese central control, based on the suzerain-tributary system between China and the two ancient kingdoms. But the argument contradicts itself, since the suzerain-tributary system in ancient East Asia was not only applied to the China-Goguryeo relation but to relations between China and other neighboring states, including Baekje, Silla, Japan, and Vietnam. Thus, when viewed only through the lens of the suzerain-tributary system,

²⁸ *Hankook Ilbo*, June 18, 2004, A17.

even the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, not to mention the ancient kingdoms mentioned above, should be undoubtedly defined as local or subordinate regimes of China.

Moreover, Goguryeo maintained relations with dynasties in both northern and southern China. If one focuses on the center-periphery relationship in a specific situation, then mutual relations within that situation should also be clearly examined. However, given that Goguryeo had suzerain-tributary relations with two Chinese dynasties, is it possible to assume that one local regime had relations with two central regimes? Which dynasties, then, were Goguryeo subject to? Taking into consideration the international order at the time, the suzerain-tributary relationship between the two represented a mere ritual and formal diplomacy and cannot be interpreted as the subordination of Goguryeo to Chinese dynasties. Goguryeo at the time had its own state name and state-administration system. Furthermore, no concrete and historical evidence has been given to support the notion that the Chinese administrator dispatched to Goguryeo ruled the latter, and that Goguryeo people felt themselves to share ethnic, historical, and cultural homogeneity vis-à-vis the Chinese people.

The concept of a local regime itself has weak points. The term “regime” refers to a ruling body that controls a certain region, based on control over ministers as well as judicial, financial, and regulatory power, and possesses a military and an independent government. Goguryeo perfectly possesses constitutive elements as an independent government. The term “local,” relative to “center,” conceptually symbolizes periphery. While “center” implies relative superiority, advancement, centralization, “centripetality,” and assimilation at the local and conceptual levels, “periphery” implies backwardness, “centrifugality,” decentralization, and dissimilation. One wonders whether there was a clear concept of “center-local” or “center-periphery” at a time when communication and exchange was so extremely constrained as to limit the power of local, cultural, and historical perspectives. It is unlikely that those who lived in peripheral areas felt themselves to be marginal, relative to the “Central Plain” (*zhongyuan*), though people at that time did understand the concept of superiority-inferiority in terms of power. Ancient people may have considered the place where they themselves were living to be the center or the “world.” In this regard, the dichotomy of center-local is an arbitrary historical interpretation that reflects the current point of view and a modern version of Sinocentrism.

Setting aside the question of where the jurisdiction of the Four commanderies lay during the period of the West Han, and whether all four commanderies were actually established or not, it is evident that Liaodong in the period of Sui and Tang was not subject to Chinese central control. If China wishes to determine the historical

sovereignty of an area according to who ruled that area in the past, then it must, to maintain logical consistency, include not only the West Han, but the Sui and Tang periods. However, China intentionally rules out those periods, while only mentioning the West Han period to its advantage. Though it is acknowledged that Goguryeo was subject to central China during the period of the West Han, it was not subject to China during the Sui and Tang periods. Therefore, it cannot be defined as having been under central Chinese rule.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, even Chinese history books and the works of distinguished historians defined Goguryeo as belonging to Korean history. Almost all Chinese people who were exposed to these perspectives likewise viewed this history as part of Korean history. The majority of them do not have any historical consciousness of their having descended from Goguryeo and no introductory works of Chinese history have ever represented the Goguryeo people as being subject to Chinese people. These points clearly reveal that previous Chinese historians viewed Goguryeo as a part of Korean history.

China argues that after the collapse of the kingdom, the remaining Goguryeo people were absorbed into China. But this argument also has a weak point. Although the majority of those who were absorbed into China were from Goguryeo, there were also many Silla people present. Furthermore, the Tang administration and the private sector referred to the whole of them as Silla people.²⁹ Moreover, almost everyone who became prisoner of war or was forced to move to China no doubt dreamed of returning to their home country.³⁰

In many orthodox historiographies, including the *Houhanshu* (History of the Later Han), *Beishi* (History of the Northern Dynasties), *Xintangshu* (New History of the Tang), *Jiutangshu* (Old History of the Tang), and the *Yuanshi* (History of the Yuan), Goguryeo is described as one of the Three Kingdoms and as being unrelated to China.³¹ Also, along with sections on Baekje and Silla, Goguryeo section is regarded as one of section on foreign states in grouped biographies of the standard Chinese histories. *History of the Northern Dynasties* treated Goguryeo people as foreigners along with

²⁹ Piao (2004, 6).

³⁰ 咸康七年 魏 遷都龍城。率勁卒四萬 入白南陝 以伐宇文 高句麗 ... 句麗 百濟及宇文 部之人 皆兵勢所徙 非如中國慕義而至 咸有思歸之心。 *Jinshu* (History of Jin), *juan* 220.

³¹ 穢及沃沮 句驪 本皆朝鮮之地也。 *Houhanshu* (History of the Later Han); 太宗貞觀初 高麗百濟同 仁新羅 連年兵不解 新羅告急 帝假子奢員外散騎侍郎 持節諭旨 平三國之憾。 *Xintangshu* (New History of Tang); 壬辰 玄宗御朝勤 ... 文武百僚 二王後 孔子後 諸方朝集使 ... 高麗朝鮮王 百濟 帶方王 ... 咸在位。 *Jiutangshu* (Old History of Tang); (元)樞密院臣議征高麗事 ... 今之高麗 乃古新羅 百濟 高句麗三國并而爲一。 *Yuanshi* (History of Yuan).

Silla and Japanese people.³² These points serve as evidence that China long ago recognized Goguryeo as falling under foreign history.

Just as the Joseon dynasty in the late fourteenth century proclaimed itself the successor of Old Joseon, as Wang Geon, the founding king of the Goryeo kingdom named his kingdom Goryeo after Goguryeo. This was an expression of his will to succeed Goguryeo and a reflection of the continuity between Goguryeo and Goryeo which has been cherished by Korea people. As seen from the passage, “Mahan is Goryeo, Byeonhan is Baekje, and Jinhan is Silla,”³³ mentioned by Choe Chi-won, a distinguished scholar of the Silla dynasty, Silla people also saw Goguryeo as one of the Three Kingdoms.

At an academic conference held in Yanji City of Jilin Province, China, in August 2004, even a Chinese scholar criticized the argument that Goguryeo’s history is identified with that of China’s, citing historical evidence. His statement was based on the following historical foundations: 1) During the reign of King Jangsu, the suzerain-minister, tributary, and subordinate relations between Goguryeo and the Middle Kingdom were turned into relations between two independent states; 2) As for the relationship between Goguryeo and Goryeo, Goguryeo history should be included in ancient Korean history; 3) Goguryeo belongs to the cultural system of the Korean nation in terms of culture, custom, and habit.³⁴

Conclusion

The Northeast Project is an issue to be addressed academically, as key persons involved in the project have pointed out. At the same time, the project is a political issue, in that it strives to exalt Chinese patriotic tradition, maintain Chinese unification as well as the security and unity of China, complete Chinese territorial sovereignty, and stabilize regions where ethnic minority groups are concentrated.³⁵ To reiterate, the Northeast Project gives top priority to dealing with the consequences and impact on northeast China due to political changes on the Korean peninsula, in addition to any changes in the East Asian international order that would inevitably follow. The project is also

³² 其人雜有新羅 高麗 倭等 亦有中國人。 “Baijichuan” (History of Baekje), in *Beishi* (History of the Northern Dynasties), *juan* 94.

³³ 馬韓則高麗 弁韓則百濟 辰韓則新羅也。 “Jiri” (Geography), in *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms), *gwon* 34.

³⁴ For further information, see Piao (2004, 6-11).

³⁵ Quan (2003, 7-9); Wang (2003, 3-4).

secondarily concerned with the border dispute between China and Russia, along with the Russo-Chinese immigration issue. We can infer from this that the academic and historical justifications used in the project are actually tools mobilized for solving political problems.

As seen above, the Northeast Project is primarily designed to offer a systemic and extensive analysis of the logic behind the North and South Korean argument that Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae are all ancient Korean kingdoms, and then to develop a logic that would redefine those histories as Chinese history, by finding, arranging, and analyzing existing primary materials. In addition, the project strives to efficiently anticipate the border or territory disputes that might occur following Korean reunification. Thus, the second goal of the project is to prevent the Korean-Chinese from feeling confused about their national identity, thus reassuring and strengthening the argument that they are Chinese nationals. Third, it is designed to maintain **social stability of the Chinese Northeast**. It is directly connected to the Chinese government's macro framework for policy that seeks to stabilize China. It is based on the consolidation of Chinese national and territorial integrations and made possible by the influence of Korean reunification on the Chinese northeast region and the Korean-Chinese. Fourth, China seeks to promote its influence and status through the project in which each program actively addresses changes in the political climate on the Korean peninsula and entailed changes in the Northeast Asian international order. In this regard, the Northeast Project can be understood as a Chinese political strategy for Northeast Asia, which transcends ordinary academic justifications.

In regards to Chinese strategy, it is noteworthy that the project has been conducted to devise realistic countermeasures for both present and future political changes on the Korean peninsula. Although rigid secrecy has been preserved in regards to the research project, particularly in terms of the applied research, it can be surmised that it will have great impact on the destiny of the Korean peninsula, as it is linked to Korean issues. As such, a full understanding of the entire scope of the project is urgently needed. Given that the Northeast Project is not only an academic, but a hot political issue, and is further concerned with the Chinese Northeast Asian strategy, it is highly possible that the project can escalate into a larger East Asian issue, transcending a mere Korean-Chinese problem.

The Northeast Project is marked by several characteristics. First, it is a typical case of **"projecting the present onto the ancient (*yigu weijin*)"**, because it manipulates ancient history to accommodate contemporary needs and thereby seeks to complete Chinese national and territorial integration. In other words, historical justifications

found in the project cannot be accepted as historical facts, as something derived from free academic exchange among nation-states and the joint survey of related relics. Rather, the project is a politically-colored historical view that was hastily constructed by monopolizing the study of the remains and relics of an ancient kingdom. It is evident that, far from being able to gain historical legitimacy from neighboring countries, the project will only bring about cultural and political conflict between China and the two Koreas. In this regard, the project's historical justification may contradict the epochal demand for the "realization of East Asian community," which has drawn public attention since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Second, the Chinese theory of "a unified multi ethnic nation-state" is founded on the following viewpoints: a historical view that defines any nation's activity that took place within contemporary Chinese territory as being included in Chinese history; a view of nation that defines all nations or ethnic groups located within contemporary Chinese territory as Chinese people;³⁶ and a view of territory that applies the modern concepts of "territory" and "national borders" retroactively to the premodern period, when such jurisdiction was vague. All these clearly demonstrate that the project is a product of a historical perception based on a territory-centered view.

Finally, the historical justification found in the Northeast Project can be described as a prelude to **Neo-Sino-centrism**, which is a modern transformation of traditional **Sino-centrism**, since it defines tributary states as subordinate, based on the traditional investiture-tributary system, and promotes statism, which takes various forms as patriotism, a theory of a "unified multiethnic nation-state," and a "formulation of the Chinese nation," which are strongly colored by a sense of "Chinese superiority." In this sense, the Northeast project can be interpreted as reflecting the Chinese cultural and political desire to restore the superiority it enjoyed in the past.

What should be done to cope with the Chinese interpretation of history seen in the Northeast Project? Can it be solved through academic exchanges between Korea and China? Given that Chinese academics and the press cannot afford to criticize the government's policy direction, initiating an academic settlement through the private sector seems difficult to expect. Then, is it possible to share historical views and conduct a joint history project among East Asian countries, as in the case of Europe? That, too, seems difficult. European societies had ancient Greek and Roman cultures and medieval Christian culture in common, and were only separated as individual nations when they entered the modern period. Consequently, Europeans share with one another a strong sense of common origins. In contrast, East Asia, which existed as

³⁶ Bai (1984, 8).

separate countries from the beginning, does not share a sense of homogeneous origins. While Europe is founded upon a sense of trust following the German people's apologies for their nation's war crimes, there is an air of pervasive distrust among East Asian countries, since the issue of Japan's war of aggression remains unresolved. In addition, Europeans are very similar in terms of living standards and a weak sense of exclusivism, whereas East Asian societies are highly exclusionary and have various standards of living. Thus, sincere reflection and mutual understanding are required for East Asian countries to be able to share historical views.

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