

Korean Interpretations of Korean Archaeology

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KOREAN ARCHAEOLOGY has made great strides since Pearson's (1975*b*) chapter on archaeology in *Studies on Korea, A Scholar's Guide*, and even since my summary of Korean archaeology as it was known five years ago (Nelson 1982). Much of the improvement has been due to increased field activity in Korea, but Korean interpretations, which are the subject of this review, have diversified as well. The bulk of publication on Korean archaeology is naturally in Korean, with a secondary but still impressive number of writings in Japanese. If these Asian languages are inaccessible to a scholar with an interest in Korean archaeology, whether cursory or intense, there is a limited number of papers and monographs to consult. In this review article I will discuss four books and several papers by Korean archaeologists that have appeared in English, translated by the authors or others. These publications are compared not only with each other but also to some extent with the Korean archaeological literature, which has been greatly expanding in recent years. They are also critiqued in terms of their inclusiveness with respect to current work in Korea and whether they are representative of current opinions.

The earliest English language monograph on Korean archaeology is *The Prehistory of Korea* by Jeong-hak Kim. The translation that appeared in English in 1978 was translated from the Japanese version published in 1972, which was based on earlier work in Korean. Therefore, this book lacks most of the discoveries of the last two decades as well as more recent theoretical trends. The second book considered here consists of three papers by Korean archaeologists, with an introduction and commentary by other Asian scholars. *The Traditional Culture and Society of Korea: Prehistory* (Pearson 1975*a*) is the result of a symposium held in 1971. The volume is out of print, which is unfortunate, since it contains much interesting detail. It represents the rethinking of Korean archaeology after the early influence of Japanese interpretations, venturing into previously unexplored territory. In 1981, UNESCO published *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the Republic of Korea* by Won-yong Kim (W. Y. Kim 1981*a*), which fills in gaps from earlier publications. A North Korean book, *The Outline of Korean History*, was published anonymously in 1977 by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Pyongyang. Although there are only two chapters devoted to prehistory, this little book contains the essence of interpretations by archaeologists in the north, and it should not be overlooked. Finally, in the 1980s several archaeological papers, published in Korean else-

where, have appeared in *Korea Journal*. These are usually translated by the authors and are often somewhat abridged versions of the original papers. *Korea Journal* performs a very valuable service in making these articles available to a wider scholarship. These sources will not suffice to make one an "expert" on Korean archaeology, but they do collectively contain a great deal of basic data, as well as the flavor of the discipline as it is practiced in Korea.

Although it is easy to discern that chronology building is the most persistent theme in the emerging discipline of Korean archaeology, that diffusion or migration are the most common explanatory devices, and that identification of ethnic groups with specific sites and artifacts is a recurring theme, the orientations of the various authors are still far from identical.

J. H. Kim (1978) focuses on problems of chronology within major periods. Since his book was written when there were very few radiocarbon dates, and before many careful stratigraphic excavations had been conducted, he tends to depend on stylistic trends for chronological direction. Regional differences are also noted, but they are used primarily to trace diffusion patterns.

In the Pearson volume (1975*b*), each author addressed somewhat different questions, but problems of chronology loom large in each. Pow-key Sohn wrote very briefly of North Korean Palaeolithic sites, and at more length about his own discoveries at Sokchangni, where gross typological changes in stone implements were noted in a controlled stratigraphic excavation. Won-yong Kim made a very first heroic effort at dividing the Neolithic into early, middle, and late periods, based on ceramic stylistic variability throughout the Korean peninsula. His version of periodization suggests that whole areas belong to only one of these stages, rather than persisting throughout the whole Neolithic with local changes through time. Jung-bae Kim (1975) argued that there is a Korean Bronze Age (this fact is no longer in doubt), citing evidence that includes styles of bronze artifacts as well as the contexts of the finds, especially type of burial structure and associated burial goods.

The North Korean book presents the predictable accounts of "primitive society" (matriarchal clans), and "ancient society" (slave-owning states), interspersed with tidbits of important information. There is some detail regarding the paleolithic cave finds, stone tool types in the neolithic, and the finds of metal objects in the north.

W. Y. Kim (1981*a*), in the UNESCO volume, makes an unexpected selection of sites, omitting some important discoveries that had been recent at the time of publication. Only one each of Palaeolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age sites are discussed. Tomb sites from Silla, Kaya, and Paekche are given more extended treatment, as are the historic sites of Anapji Pond and the Shinam shipwreck. The orientation of the book is descriptive, and cultural-historical interpretations are presented as fact.

The papers published in *Korea Journal*, about which more will be said individually later, demonstrate a trend toward new questions: relationship to the environment and the social structure of both sites and time periods. These papers tend to be translations and abridgements of important current articles in the Korean journals. It is only too bad that there are not more of them.

One general problem in these translations is the lack of standardized terminology. The problem exists in the original Korean as well, with both Sino Korean and pure Korean terms used in many cases. Translations of artifact descriptions can be especially bothersome. In J. H. Kim (1978) we have "pipe-shaped ornaments" which are tubular beads (in this case *pipe* as in conduit, not *pipe* as in smoking), and in Pearson (1975*b*) we

find “rosary-shaped” bronze ornaments, which are actually cruciform. The most puzzling to me was reference to the Liaoning dagger as “T-shaped” (Choi [1984], who adapted the terminology from Chang [1977]). The shape of these implements is not even remotely like a *T*; only the hilts, cast separately from the blades, and sometimes made of nonmetallic materials, are shaped like *T*s. The blades, whose outlines resemble brackets { } are the more characteristic part of the implement. Artifact descriptions can be misleading when words are intended to evoke the shape of an object but fail to do so accurately. When the translator is unfamiliar with objects in one culture or the other, these oddities tend to occur. Only good illustrations can overcome this problem entirely, and few of these publications are well illustrated.

These publications differ in their coverage of the major archaeological stages, depending on the date of publication and the author’s interests. Some indication of the breadth and depth of this treatment is discussed below.

Palaeolithic

Palaeolithic sites are generally categorized in terms of stone tool morphology. Given the paucity of work on Pleistocene geology and geomorphology in Korea (Seonbok Yi’s [1984] paper is an exception) and the rarity of ¹⁴C dates, the use of tool morphology for relative dating is understandable. Since the typology as a dating tool is already being questioned and may not stand up to future scrutiny, it is of limited usefulness. J. H. Kim (1978) is cautious about the Paleolithic, calling the sites of Tonggwanjin, Kulpori, and Sokchangni “preceramic.” His descriptions are nearly as complete as the original reports, including the general layout, the soil context, the depth of finds, tool morphology, parent material of the stone tools, and associated animal bones, as well as the context of the excavation—the excavator and the date.

Sohn (1975) passes briefly over the previously discovered North Korean sites, adding a few words about Pupori to the sites reported in J. H. Kim (1978). A brief mention of Ma’amni (which turned out to have little of interest) precedes a longer description of Sokchangni. Sohn (1975) includes the same categories as J. H. Kim (1978) and attempts to provide population estimates. He notes associations of artifacts and suggests activities or activity clusters by the assumed functions of various tool types. Sohn also interprets “carved stones” as art forms, although few other scholars have found them convincing. W. Y. Kim (1981a) names some newly reported North Korean cave sites with cursory descriptions of the findings, including human bones reported to be Neanderthal or *Homo sapiens*. Chommal and Turubong caves are also briefly noted, but most of Kim’s Paleolithic chapter is devoted to Chon’gongni. Here we learn a bit about the excavation itself, the morphology of the tools discovered, the size of one tool (the largest?), and tool-making techniques. This site has provoked much controversy; for a different view see Hwang (1979). W. Y. Kim’s other 1981 publication (1981b) reviewed here goes into more detail about Chommal and Turubong, expressing reservations about the designation of some scratched bones as “art.”

In a summary article, Y. J. Yi (1982) provides a complete list of all Palaeolithic sites in Korea known at the time, along with an excellent map of the sites and the locations of isolated finds. The results of faunal and palynological analyses in various deposits is correlated into sequences following the European terminology, from Lower Paleolithic to Mesolithic. Characteristic stone tools are also noted, as are the rare finds of human skeletal material.

The North Korean interpretation (FLPH 1977) mentions Sangwon Cave (Komunmoru) and Kulpori, and concludes that "the Korean peninsula has every claim to being one of the oldest cradles of mankind" (1977:5). Substantively, this part of the book is rather thin.

Neolithic

Sites containing early pottery are variously called neolithic, comb-pattern, Chulmun, and geometric, but they are all seen as belonging to one prehistoric stage. The overriding problem attacked by Korean archaeologists is that of chronology, followed by the grouping of sites into stylistic regions. By far the most sophisticated explication of chronological problems is that of Hyo-jai Im (1984), which supersedes all others. Im skillfully weaves together radiocarbon dates and stylistic changes in well-excavated stratified sites, making explicit both the data and the reasoning that lead to his conclusions. This treatment shows that continuing development in place is characteristic of Korean Neolithic sites, and that previous chronological schemes that placed whole regions at one point in time can no longer be countenanced. Im's stylistic regions include the west coast, the northeast, and the south coast. Established traditions in each area are well described, although detailed site descriptions are not provided in this paper. Because of the almost exclusive emphasis on pottery, other sources must be consulted for other data categories.

W. Y. Kim (1981a) discusses only one site in his Neolithic chapter, that of Tongsamdong. This site is characterized as the "oldest neolithic," although earlier dates from Osanni are briefly noted. Kim stresses that deep sea fishing and connections with sites in Japan are evident from the beginning and throughout the layers of Tongsamdong. He suggests that Layer 2 represents the onset of agriculture, beginning around 2500 B.C. (Kim uses uncalibrated dates; Im would place this same shift around 3500 B.C.). In spite of the emphasis on connections with Japan, where still earlier pottery has been found, Kim reiterates that these are Paleo-Siberian people; he cites the language affiliation of Korean with the Ural-Altai family. This is a remnant of the old diffusionist assumption that Chulmun (Combware) came from Siberia, which seems to be quite untenable in terms of both dates and styles in the intervening area of Manchuria.

Writing a decade earlier, W. Y. Kim (1975) was dealing with fewer than half the sites known by 1980. His chronological discussion has been superseded, but site descriptions of Chonghori near Pyongyang, Amsari and Misari on the Han River, and Kulpori (= Sopohang) in the northeast are quite detailed and worth consulting.

J. H. Kim (1978) describes additional sites in considerable detail. His site descriptions usually include the extent of the site, the general location, and thickness and soil type of the stratigraphic layers. Pottery characteristics include shape, paste, temper, and surface treatment. Stone and bone tools are described and illustrated, and distributions of artifacts in dwellings are given when known. Plant and animal remains are mentioned as well. Fairly detailed information can be found about the following sites: Amsari and Misari on the Han River, Chitamni, Kungsanni, Sejungni Layer I, and Sinamni Layer I in the northwest; Nongpodong in the northeast, and Tongsamdong and Yongsongdong in the south.

A fishing subsistence base without agriculture in the earliest Chulmun sites is the consensus in South Korea, with agriculture believed to have been introduced in middle

or late Neolithic. In contrast, FLPH (1977) locates the beginning of the Neolithic in the fifth millennium B.C. and postulates agriculture from the beginning, along with domestic animals and fishing.

Bronze Age

A decade ago the question of whether there was a proper Bronze Age in Korea was still being debated (J. B. Kim 1975). The most recent of the papers discussed here (Choi 1984) attempts to understand the social structure of the Bronze Age, and ventures the opinion that it represents a chiefdom level society. This does not mean that the earlier writings can be safely ignored, however, for J. B. Kim (1975) and J. H. Kim (1978) both present data that are wide-ranging and detailed. The association of Mumun pottery with bronze, as well as dolmens, stone cist burials, rice, and various other categories of artifacts, has been accepted as a single contemporaneous complex by some, and considered by others as a chronological puzzle in which elements were added and recombined in complex ways. There is no fundamental agreement among Korean archaeologists on these issues—an important *caveat* when reading about this time period because the assumptions are rarely made explicit.

The presentation of J. H. Kim (1978) separates Mumun pottery sites from a discussion of bronze. Nearly two dozen sites are described in detail, from both North Korea and South Korea, and a chronological sequence is constructed on the basis of changes in vessel shapes and associated artifacts. Independent chronologies are built up for changes in bronze daggers and bronze mirrors. Sites in the Liaodong Peninsula, included for comparison with Korean sites, are usefully described and illustrated.

The documentation of bronze as a separate stage before iron is the chief concern of J. B. Kim (1975). Rather than concentrating on typology, Kim considers bronze artifacts in the context of burials and dwellings. He feels that ascribing ethnic affiliations is an important task and associates Liaodong sites with the Tunghu and northern Manchuria with old Sushen. He relates the Korean bronze to the Karasuk bronzes, based not only on the styles of bronze implements but also on the associated slab graves, which are distributed from Transbaikal through northern Mongolia and Manchuria to Korea. (Adaptations and subsistence bases are not uniform throughout this vast area, however. Horses, sheep, and cattle are found in Transbaikal and Mongolia, but pigs were important in Manchuria, the Maritime region, and Korea.) Kim also discusses the distribution of molds for making bronze artifacts that have been found in Korea, concluding that bronze metallurgy was locally practiced. The Liaodong sword is considered to be early, and the antenna sword late. Associations of bronze swords with types of tombs, as well as other burial goods, lead him to the conclusion that dolmens and slab cist graves that contain bronze artifacts and/or polished stone tools are earlier than jar coffins and pit tombs. The latter may also contain bronze, but they never have stone daggers and include iron artifacts. This point of view has been generally accepted. Various groups mentioned in early Chinese documents are identified with specific areas or styles. Kim identifies the Bronze Age inhabitants of Korea with the Ye-Maek; he believes they also founded the earliest Korean states of Puyo and Ancient Chosun. During the Warring States period, the Dong-I occupied Liaodong. They were eventually conquered by the northern Chinese state of Yen, which itself may have been a mixture of Han Chinese and Dong-I peoples.

W. Y. Kim (1981a) considers the "Ye-Maek Tungus" as the bearers of the Bronze Age as well. He is skeptical of all dates earlier than 1000 B.C. His discussion of types of dolmens is not easy to understand, although he follows the usual tripartite division into a "northern" type with a large flat capstone perched on a tall boxlike understructure, and two "southern" styles with the capstone either directly on the ground or resting only on small stones. The choice of Namsongni as the sole site to include here is surprising. This burial has interesting contents, but it was largely excavated by a local farmer before archaeologists were apprised of it and so much potential information is missing. It would have been useful if Kim had included the sites of Hunamni and Songamdong, both well-excavated habitation sites. Han (1977) provides brief descriptions of several important finds, which are all burials: Mugyeri, Songgungni, Koejongdong, and Taegongni.

The paper by Choi takes a social-structural approach, and includes few details of either sites or artifacts. Some interesting facts emerge, however, such as the grouping of dolmens into "cemeteries," overall village size estimates, and the possibility of extended family households. (Choi does not deal with differences in house style, although it should be germane to his argument. Some Mumun dwellings are long houses with several hearths, while others are just slightly expanded versions of Chulmun dwellings.) Some of Choi's interpretations may be open to question (for example, assuming that the stones used for dolmens were quarried when the landscape is full of suitable stones, or equating the burial of luxury goods directly with a chieftdom) but the approach itself should yield new insights. Once more we have the Ye-Maek Tungus migrating into Korea (obviously a very common interpretation), with no concrete evidence cited. While other archaeologists link the dolmens and stone cists (they are often found together, but each also exists separately), Choi posits the novel idea that stone cists and dolmens represent different "systems." This is not argued at any length, but the precedence of dolmens is suggested, along with the possibility that the two burial styles may represent social differences rather than a chronological sequence. Affinities of the bronze implements in stone cists with shamanistic paraphernalia of the present (mirrors, bells, knives) is an interesting observation, but more systematically presented evidence is needed before any of this is convincing.

The FLPH (1977) volume on North Korea asserts, like Choi, that the Bronze Age represents a social shift, in this case to a "patriarchal clan community." Both agricultural and specialist production are seen as expanded, assumed to be the work of males. This shift is dated about 1500 B.C. The system expanded until the founding of the state of Ancient Chosun, dated to the eighth century B.C. and located in the Liaodong region. The assertion is made that iron was worked at this time, as witnessed by a site with everyday iron implements found in dwellings. This site, Pomuigusok, is near a large iron mine in the northeast. The primacy of Korean iron usage is postulated.

In conclusion, although there is no single publication in English on Korean archaeology that is up to date, inclusive, and interpretive, much can be learned from the writings published in English by Koreans. In many cases it is better to use several sources than to rely on a single source; in the aggregate the publications are a highly useful body of work.

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