Korean Archaeology: Retrospect and Prospect*

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It is a great honour to be given a chance to talk about Korean archaeology, as I have experienced it for the last four decades, in the presence of many distinguished guests. I am especially flattered by that Dr. Kim Chae-Wôn, the first director of the National Museum of Korea and a pioneer in Korean archaeology, personally came to celebrate the occasion. I also feel indebted to Professors Chôn Hae-chong and Chim Hong-sŏp, who put such fine memories of the past into letters.

I entered the National Museum in February, 1947, backed by the kind consideration of Dr. Kim Chae-wôn, so that I can say I have studied both archaeology and art history for the last forty years. Today's talk will be limited to Korean archaeology, but it is a truism that the discipline of art history also developed marvelously over last four decades. In every major field of the discipline, such as architecture, painting, sculpture, craft and ceramic studies, a number of specialists are actively engaged in research.

There are three topics that I would like to put forward today. These three topics may not be the most important topics of Korean archaeology of the 1980s, but these I selected because they are the ones that I am interested in and that I would like to pursue for life if I were a beginning archaeologist.

The first topic is about when the Neolithic began in Korea. As you well know, the Japanese during the occupation period argued that there does not

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exist any Palaeolithic phase in the Korean prehistoric cultural sequence, which later turned out to be wrong, with discoveries of a number of Palaeolithic localities throughout the country. With these finds, we may be able to establish a Korean Palaeolithic sequence according to the commonly-adopted three-stage scheme of Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic.

So far, the only missing part in the Korean prehistoric sequence is the Mesolithic phase. Reporting the Sŏkchang-ri site, Professor Sohn Pow-key apparently sees the possibility of a Mesolithic bed in the uppermost layer of the site, given the abundance of small pieces of lithics which include a number of microblades. Also a lithic-bearing bed below the Neolithic strata of Sangnodaedŏ shell-midden could be the remains of a Mesolithic phase, as indicated by the reportees. It seems to me that some triangular-shaped pieces from this layer bear certain resemblances to European Tardenosian points. The formal similarity alone of course cannot be the definitive evidence by itself for claiming its Mesolithic age, and we must find stratified site(s), such as the French site of Mas d'Azil, which will demonstrate a clear stratigraphic relationship between Palaeo-, Meso- and Neolithic phases. Nevertheless, the discovery of Sangnodaedŏ is significant as there exists a pre-ceramic layer containing only lithics of Upper Palaeolithic tradition. Woosan-ri site in Sungju, Chŏlanamdo, which was found during the course of dolmen excavation, may also shed some light in future about Mesolithic research, as a number of a Mesolithic-like lithics are scattered over a wide area. I see that recognizing the presence of a Mesolithic phase will be an important task for Korean archaeology.

There is no doubt that Korea was occupied by early hominids during the Pleistocene. However, it had been widely held that Pleistocene hominids following the emigrating game animals moved out of Korea with the end of the Pleistocene so that, until the reoccupation of the peninsula by Palaeo-Asiatics, or Palaeo-Siberians, with the beginning of the Neolithic around 3,000 to 4,000 B.C., Korea was left vacant. That is, the first four to five thousand years of the Holocene can be marked by the lack of cultural continuity. Thus, the identification of Mesolithic phase in Korea implies that we can write an uninterrupted history of the Korean people for hundreds of thousands of years from the Palaeolithic on. The importance of the discovery of a Mesolithic site lies in this very fact.

The oldest Neolithic sites found in the southern part of the peninsula are Tongsamdong shell-midden in Pusan, Amsadong settlement site at Seoul, and Osan-ri settlement site at Yangyang. The latter has been excavated since 1980. Radiocarbon dates from these sites are 4790 and 4725 B.C. for Tongsamdong, 5175 B.C. for Amsadong, and 5170 B.C. for Osan-ri, re-
spectively Professor Im, Hyo-jai, claimed that Osan-ri could be as old as 6000 B.C. in consideration of dendrochronological recalibration. If this can be accepted, we may postulate cultural continuity from the Palaeolithic on, given that there does exist as Mesolithic phase.

The oldest Neolithic site in China, Peiligang, has two chronometric dates, 7350 and 5900 B.C. The Chinese apparently adopt the latter date only for age estimation of the site, which puts the age of Peiligang in the sixth millennium B.C., comparable to Osan-ri. In Japan, the oldest pottery is associated with C-14 dates of 10,700 and 10,400 B.C. as reported from the Fukui cave locality near Nagasaki. At first these dates were considered too old, but they are now considered genuine, so pottery-making began in Japan for the first time in the world. As these examples indicate, the increasing amount of Neolithic evidence throughout the world is associated with much earlier dates than previously considered. Thus, if it can be said that identification of the Mesolithic is an important task for Palaeolithic specialists, Neolithic specialists must attempt to find still older localities than we now know.

Until not so long ago, Korean Neolithic pottery was believed to be represented by comb-pattern ware. However, with evidence from Tong-samdong and Osan-ri, we now know that comb-pattern ware was preceded by at least two different types of pottery, namely appliqué ware and mouth-rim-decorated ware. Also significant is the identification of a new surface decoration motif, which can be best termed as rocking-pattern motif. This type is known in China as 之-shaped design motif, which is widely found in Mongolia and Liaoning Province, as well as in Peiligang. In Korea, this was reported from Misong-ri cave, Uju, and the lower bed of Sangnodaedo, and there is an unconfirmed report of its discovery from Sandaldo, Kojje. With the accumulation of evidence, we would rather need to have a wider geographic perspective in considering this peculiar type of Neolithic ware, probably taking the whole of Asia in view for pursuing the problem of the origin of Korean Neolithic. Also, appliqué ware is reported from Novopetrovka in the Upper Amur and Ust’Ilim site near Lake Baikal. Of course the mere discovery of similar-looking ware in distant regions such as Siberia or Manchuria cannot be taken as direct evidence for some cultural relationship between Korea and those areas; nevertheless, it seems that we have to take a wider perspective, taking the whole of Asia into consideration and attempting to understand the position of Korean culture on such a scale.

The second topic that I would like to stress is about the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period. This period was once called the Early Iron Age or
Kimhae Period in archaeology, and some historians use their own terminologies. In reality, this period can be said to be the earlier part of the Three-Kingdoms Period, as recognized by everyone. I propose this term Proto-Three Kingdoms Period, simply as a working concept which might be useful for both archaeologists and historians. Whatever the terminology of this time span might be appropriate, there have been a number of uncertainties surrounding the period. The murky situation only recently began to be cleared up by recent work by a number of specialists who maintain their interest in the archaeology of the Nakdong River area. Their work also raised new questions, and probably the most important one is related to the ceramic archaeology of this period.

The Japanese argued that the cord-patterned or mat-impressed ware known from Hoxhyŏndong shell-midden in Kimhae or Yangsan shell-midden characterize ceramics of this period and designated them Kimhae Ware. They also argued that Kimhae Wares developed into Silla Ware around A.D. 300. I also subscribed to this view, so that I claimed that “Silla Ware can be said to have all the characteristics of Kimhae Ware except surface decoration of cord-patterning or mat-impressing.” However, in 1979, excavation of burials at Choyangdong in Kyŏngju produced a new type of ware of this period, and from 1980 on new opinions on ceramics of the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period began to appear.

These new opinions can be represented by arguments proposed by Professor Shin Kyŏng-ch’ŏl, who claimed that “ceramics of the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period are not represented by the so-called Kimhae Ware as defined by the Japanese, but Wajil Ware.” The name Wajil Ware came from one common attribute that ceramics of this type share, namely soft texture with nail-scratchable surfaces. If Shin’s proposition is the case, it means that Kimhae Ware appeared only around the fourth century A.D.—i.e., that they are pottery of the Three Kingdoms Period, that shell-middens with them in them are also of later age, and that there has yet to be found sites related to the daily lives of the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period.

There are one or two questions, however, in accepting the new opinions regarding Wajil Ware. To me, their overall shape and other technological attributes indicate that they were not for everyday use—rather they look more like special ware for ritualistic purposes. Even though Wajil Ware is of Proto-Three Kingdoms Period in age, all Wajil Ware whose context of discovery is known were discovered in burial contexts. With the facts that so far there is no report of their discovery from settlement localities and that they are highly water-absorbant, this ware appeared to have been produced as burial goods. Kimhae Ware could have been produced for daily
use.

It seems that many Japanese archaeologists agree with the new proposition. However, I cannot completely accept this view. In fact, excavation of Chungdo at Ch’unch’on revealed evidence that Mumun pottery of the Bronze Age is continued by Kimhae Ware without any interruption of Wajil Ware. Also from Ch’opo-ri Wajil Ware and Kimhae Ware were found in association. In this case, Wajil Ware of later types, so that even subscribing to the new opinion, their association may not be improbable. Nonetheless, this negative evidence indicates that problems surrounding Wajil Ware in particular and ceramics of the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period in general cannot be solved immediately with the given evidence. The Proto-Three Kingdoms Period is an important period for understanding the early history of Korea, so there must be paid much greater archaeological attention. We need much more concerted effort to solve the problems surrounding this period.

The last topic I would like to mention is related to the archaeology of the Three Kingdoms Period. One of the biggest issues of this period is the beginning of the construction of tumuli with great mounds. My interest is especially with those Silla burials so abundantly found in the Kyŏngju area. Mound-building is an indication of the appearance of powerful authority in the society, or in other words the beginning of statehood. Thus, its precise dating cannot but be of great interest. This question was never put forward by the Japanese during the occupation, and tumuli mounds were vaguely considered fifth to sixth century A.D. in age; the timing of the beginning and end of mound construction was left untouched. This question began to be attacked after liberation, and during the late ’70s and ’80s, many specific aspects related to mound-building became clarified.

The most important work which shed light on resolving such problems can be said to be the excavations of Choyangdong burial site in Kyŏngju made between 1979 and 1982. Several different types of burials are known from this site. The most interesting type in relation to the origin of mound-tumulus is the one-wooden-chamber type. Burial goods were found in a separate chamber lying next to the main burial chamber. Both the contents of burial goods and the structure of burial indicate a strong cultural influence from Lolang. And this type of burial appears to be archetypical for Silla moundtumuli of the Kyŏngju area.

Excavation of Kujŏngdong burial locality in Kyŏngju in 1982 shed further light on the origin of mound-building. Here burials are all located on hilltops, but with the same structural attributes with those mound-tumuli located on the Kyŏngju plain. With this discovery it is now interpreted that
mound-building was an attempt to give lofty impressions of burials of high class by artificially making earthen mounds on top of the burial once the burial ground had shifted from the hilly area to the plain.

With the beginning of the fourth century A.D., the ruling class appeared to have adopted two-chambered burials, whose best example is shown by Pokchǒndong site at Thongrae, Pusan. Excavation reports of Burial Numbers 10 and 11 bedrock while the minor ones with burial goods only are wooden chambers. A similar type of burial is also known from Imdangdong, Kyōngsan. Here, both main and minor chambers were dug into the eroded bedrock. Minor chambers apparently were covered by some sort of tent-like structure supported by central posts, and inside them were found human skeletal remains—apparently remains of human sacrifice of the burial keepers. From the relative chronology of ceramics found with them, these burials can be safely regarded to be fourth century A.D., which seems to be the time of the spread of this type of burials throughout the Yōngnam region.

In the Kyōngju area, Tomb Number 109 at Hwangnamdong is of this age. For Paekche burials of this time, there is one at Pópchōn-ri whose age can be firmly established as it was found with Chinese ware similar to that found at burials of the early fourth century near Nanjing, China. Recent excavations at Sōkchondong, Seoul, also indicates that wooden-chambered burials were made during the late third to fourth century in the Han River region before the appearance of stone-mounds.

Despite these conclusions, it seems that some Japanese archaeologists believe that they are not necessarily correct. Those who disagree argue that such a chronology of Korean burials is difficult to accept when considering chronological findings made in Japan regarding Japanese burials, ceramics and other artifacts. For example, Tomb Number 109 at Hwangnamgdong, which we believe to be fourth century A.D. in age, is regarded by Japanese to be fifth century, leaving a gap of 100 years between the two sides. Despite the recent paper by one Japanese archaeologist which suggests the beginning of Korean mound-tumuli around the late third century, Japanese archaeologists in general seem to believe that the appearance of mound-tumuli in Korea began only around the latter part of the fourth century at best, but more probably around 400 A.D. While not ignoring such negative opinion from Japan, those burials that we believe to be fourth century A.D. appear to be of that age, and it seems that our task is to find more burials which are firmly datable to the fourth century A.D.

In relation to this, we also need to think about the question of the so-called ‘keyhole-shaped mound.’ This type of burial began to be known
only recently in Korea and now I agree that such burials do exist in Korea. But I must make a reservation that probably not all of the claimed discoveries are genuine burial mounds of this type. A claim was made that these were made during the fourth century A.D. and their construction was later diffused to Japan. However, to my knowledge no serious Japanese archaeologist agrees with it. To make the claim more credible, we need more information.

At any rate, after wooden-chambered burials of the fourth century A.D. came stone-chambered ones. Interestingly, stone-chambered burials from Sŏngsandalŏng, Sŏngju, and Pongkye-ri, Hapchŏn, are with postholes inside the wooden chamber. This evidence seems to indicate that the transition from wooden- to stone-chambered burials was intermediated by a type with a wooden-chamber surrounded by stone-chambers. But there is a possibility that those postholes were mainly for supporting structures to prevent the stone walls from collapsing.

The last phase of burials of the Three Kingdoms Period is characterized by the appearance of stone-chambers with passage entrances of the Koguryŏ and Paekche tradition. The spread of such burials from the Koguryŏ/Paekche region to the Nakdong River basin happened quite early, and it was spread to the Kyusyu area of Japan by the earlier part of the fifth century A.D. At Imdangdong, one L-shaped burial of this type, apparently of Koguryŏ tradition, was found among Silla-style burials. But at Koadong, Koryŏng, a similar burial with mural paintings is located on the lower plain, somewhat separated from Kaya-style burials lying on top of the hills. Two stone-chambers with mural paintings found at Yŏngju are also of Koguryŏ-style. They are located at the northern frontier of Silla, which may have something to do with migration of Koguryŏ people from the north. So far this is the story related to the change in burial systems of Silla.

I have been very much interested in the chronological study of burials in the Kyŏngju area. For that matter, the chronology of Silla pottery provides a starting point, which has made me maintain keen interests in the study of Silla pottery. I can say for sure that Silla pottery would be the object of my main interest if I were born again as an archaeologist. My dissertation of 1957 is also about Silla pottery. I have wanted to revise and rewrite it but with no success. One of the reasons that I have failed to do so is that I have been too busy, but more important is that the amount of data is so overwhelming now that no single person can possibly study Silla pottery. I must declare that the study of Silla pottery now requires a team approach.

From now, the chronology of Silla burials must rely on pottery chronol-
ogy. For the moment, we may grossly identify two phases in the development of Silla pottery, but further refinement is impossible. This is because we lack artifacts with absolute dates, and age estimation cannot but rely on the typological approach.

In 1981, an important study of the chronology of Silla burials appeared. While it had been commonly acknowledged that multiple burial tombs preceed single-burial tombs, Professor Choi Byŏng-hyŏn argued that the number of burials inside individual tombs has nothing to do with temporal change, but rather reflects the status difference between the buried. He recognized the positioning of major and minor chambers as the most time-sensitive attribute of Silla burials, so that 明-shaped ones preceed 仮-shaped ones. He also presented a view that those mega-mounds, like Tomb Number 98, represent the burials of the highest class. His suggestion may need more refinement; however, it put forward that new approaches and opinions are necessary in studying Silla burials.

There are a few remarks that I would like to make about the current status of Korean archaeologists for the future is intensifying the efforts for interdisciplinary research with natural scientists. The Department of Archaeology and Art History, Seoul National University, is equipped with such shamed laboratory facilities, which I must confess is my fault and I am so sorry for that matter to the students and faculty.

It will be needless to say how much archaeologists are helped by recent metallurgical analyses of artifacts of the Early Iron Age. Such a scientific approach will resolve the credibility problem that archaeologists may confront in deriving conclusions from the findings. There recently appeared a report that Korean comma-shaped jades do not contain strontium and zirconium as is the case for Japanese jades, which implies that raw material for Korean jades should have been procured locally. Also recent studies of pottery, by applying sedimentological methods, succeeded in making some important conclusions of the ancient technology and production. If we can apply such efforts to Silla pottery so that we can identify the production center, we will get important information about many aspects of Silla society, production economy surely being one of them. For these reasons, I am saying that enlarging and intensifying cooperation with natural scientists will be critical for the development of archaeology.

Next I would like to mention the necessity of having a better understanding of the archaeology of neighboring countries. A proper understanding of Korean history and culture requires a proper understanding of those of Asia in general and of China, Siberia, and Japan in particular. Nationalism and chauvinism might be necessary for political problems, but absolutely not
for scientific quests. Emotion must be kept out of scientific research. What is important is to abstract truth out of raw data through logical processes. Of course we are Koreans and we cannot escape this fact. Nevertheless emphasizing being Korean gives no help to the development of science. For many laymen, archaeology often invokes nationalistic feelings, and these feelings sometimes tell archaeologists what to do and what not to do. Such a social environment will make only a hindrance for developing science in general and archaeology in particular.

A 1981 Nobel laureate, Dr. Fukui of Japan, was asked by reporters what was the most important factor for his receiving the Nobel prize. His reply was that 'one of them is the social environment which guarantees free thinking'. I think this is very important. If one says that "this artifact came from Japan", he is regarded as pro-Japanese. In contrast, the Japanese are not ashamed of telling shameful stories of their history or culture. This can happen since they are proud of their culture and country. Truth and love of fatherland are different matters. At least for archaeology, artifacts must be treated across the political boundary of the twentieth century. By doing so, we can have a clearer picture of the inter-cultural relationships and characteristics of our own culture, and the study of Korean history can be further developed into the study of world history and mankind history.

For archaeologists it means that we must be well acquainted with the archaeology of Japan and China. In 1985, the Institute of Archaeology of Shanxi Province, China, published a translation of "A Study of Korean Palaeolithic Culture" (by Kim Won-yong, Choi Mu-jang, and Chung Yung-hwa) published by the Academy of Korean Studies. As an appendix it includes a translation of a part of my publication, "Introduction to Korean Archaeology". While the Chinese are translating and studying Korean literature, there is no China specialist in Korea. Scholastic intercourse between Korea and China will begin at any moment in the future, but unfortunately there is nobody who can actively participate in it. The same is true for Japanese archaeology. Our information on Japan is only superficial, so that few Japanese pay much attention to claims made by Koreans regarding the origin of Japanese culture. We must know well about Japanese archaeology and their artifacts in order to identify artifacts and cultural elements from Korea among the remains found in Japan. It is high time to learn about Chinese and Japanese archaeology, and we must produce specialists.

It is, of course, the fault of Korean archaeological society in general that we do not have such specialists. However, we may lessen the blame by pointing our finger at the government. It is practically impossible to make a living by specializing in Chinese or Japanese archaeology. This problem of
bread-and-butter needs government-level attention. Government should make an investment, such as by making a research institution. I would like to ask the Academy of Korean Studies to take more consideration of the current situation. King Sejong once told the young scholars of his time that for them to read and study are the best way of loving one's country. Government should pay more attention to making a the social environment in which young and able scholars can pursue their course of research and study after college.

My final comment will be about the specialization of the discipline. As you well know, after liberation the National Museum was the only research institute for archaeology and there were few interested persons. I myself had to pay attention to Stone Age archaeology all the way to the Choson period. Many mistakes were made during the course. However, we must not repeat such mistakes, and specialization of the field is absolutely necessary. In Japan, for example, one can find many specialists of a given topic, such as ceramics on a certain period, which enables Japanese archaeology to produce a thoughtful paper when a new discovery is made in Korea. I cannot but feel shameful when comparing the quantity and quality of research papers about Korean archaeology published in Korea and Japan after liberation. Despite the abundance of research opportunities and archaeological remains in Korea, we are short of specialists who can pursue specific problems. Excavation of important sites is necessary, but what seems to be better necessary is to have better planned excavations and to study the results of such excavations more comprehensively.

I hope that Korean archaeology will be led by more young and able archaeologists and with appropriate support the archaeology of Korea will blossom in the future. For me, the last forty years have passed so fast. I am so thankful for every one of you who came to celebrate the occasion and lent your time for this talk. Thank you.

(translated by Yi Seon-bok)