Western Views of Northeast China in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages

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I. Introduction

Western views of Dongbei archaeology cannot be said to be different from those of East Asian archaeologists – they can be said to hardly exist. Dongbei is the most neglected region of Chinese archaeology, yet I believe it is one of the most important. From the Dongbei we can learn about the movement of ethnic groups, long distance trade, and the spread of ideas. It is a laboratory for understanding identities. We can learn about relationships of peoples within East Asia as they shifted spaces and changed their economic, social, and political structures. We can learn about rituals, leadership, ideologies and other hot topics of recent Western archaeology.

Ancient texts relating to the Dongbei are few, with descriptions that are less than complete, and distances that are unreliable. Some historical information is found in histories of the Han dynasty conquest of northern Korea. An expedition in the Wei dynasty brought data about people all the way north to the Amur River, but the information is sketchy. For the most part, it is unknown territory to those who study Chinese texts. However, the Dongbei is a region that is beginning to be known from archaeological discoveries, in ways that history never mentioned. Thanks to archaeology, a clearer picture of the region is beginning to emerge, and much of it is unexpected.

II. My connections with the Dongbei

I will frame this presentation in terms of my own career, using my position as a senior scholar to talk about the way things were, in order to take stock of where we are in Dongbei archaeology. I will end with some thoughts about questions to be answered with future archaeology.

My first archaeological experience apart from my mentors at the University of Michigan was a survey for Korean Neolithic sites along the Han River. I had the opportunity to live in Korea for a year, and I needed material for a
dissertation. A big drawback was that I was ignorant about East Asian archaeology in general, and Korean archaeology in particular. During that year, I had to learn rapidly—with the help of many Korean archaeologists who were generous with their time and wisdom. I discovered that writings in western languages were few. Tish Sample’s 1969 dissertation was available to read, and her research on Korean archaeology provided a thorough grounding for me. The book I found most helpful for a general framework was Owen Lattimore’s Inner Asian Frontiers of China (1940). Lattimore was writing about contemporary conditions, but it was useful knowledge for me. These works, however, show how much there was still to learn about the past of East Asia, not just the Dongbei.

During my year in Korea, I had opportunities to travel in Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but China was completely closed to Americans. In the spring of 1971 I stood in Macao and looked over toward the Peoples’ Republic of China. It had been sealed off from the rest of the world since the middle of the century, and I remember thinking that I would never the able to go there. And yet, China did open to the west, not long after that.

In the meantime I had my dissertation to write, and I searched for every scrap of information available. I had learned that there was a Korean connection to the Dongbei in the Bronze Age, that bronze weapons and mirrors came to the Korean peninsula from that region. In those days in America, processual archaeology was beginning to take hold, meaning I should look at subsistence and settlements patterns, and use statistics to show that the relationships I suggested could be shown scientifically. American archaeology then studied systems—economic, political, and social systems, but not the people who lived in those systems. It was practically taboo to talk about ethnicity, or ideology, or migration or diffusion. Historical accounts were declared uninteresting or old fashioned.

Thus, I wrote my dissertation about subsistence and settlement in Neolithic Korea, with statistics— behaving like a good student. Although I was interested in connections and differences, they did not appear in my dissertation very much. Nevertheless, I read all that was available. There was remarkably little, which reflected the paucity of archaeology in the Dongbei as much as the lack of translations.

Here’s what was available in Western languages about the Dongbei in the early 1970s. For archaeology of China, there was the 1968 edition of K. C. Chang’s book, The Archaeology of Ancient China. This comprehensive volume contained some information about a few sites, like Angangxi and Linxi, mostly Mesolithic and early Neolithic sites that had been explored before the formation of the People’s Republic of China. Some of Okladnikov’s papers published in Russian had been translated into English, so I had a sense of the archaeology of the Russian Far East. A few archaeological reports from North Korea had appeared in Russian, and some of these made their way into English translations. Some Japanese publications from the 1920s and 1930s had appeared in English, or with English
translations. Russian publications tended to be focused on chronology, and to a lesser extent ethnicity. The Japanese publications were detailed in descriptions, and related the sites to textual accounts, where possible.

When my family returned to Colorado, again I was in the midst of archaeology that I knew nothing about. Since Korea was too far away and my three sons were too young to leave them for long, I settled down to learn about the archaeology of the southwestern United States, and even had a field school in Utah. But Korea was still on my mind, and when I had a chance to go back to Korea as a lecturer for Semester at Sea, I extended my time in Korea to visit all the Korean archaeologists I knew from seven years before. I learned what had been newly discovered, and talked to them about writing a book in English about Korean archaeology. As usual they were gracious and helpful, and I began to collect site reports and articles to write the book.

By this time Chester Chard had published his book, Northeast Asia in Prehistory. His interest was focused on Paleolithic and Neolithic sites for the most part. He synthesized the Russian sites from Siberia, and material from Japan, but information about Korea and the Dongbei was disappointingly thin.

Chard lamented the lack of sites from the early Holocene, saying, “The discovery of well-dated early Holocene sites will be awaited with much interest” (Chard 1974:61).

In terms of the Dongbei, which he calls Manchuria, Chard likewise regrets the thinness of the data: “Unfortunately our picture of prehistoric Manchuria is based primarily on surveys and sampling of sites, only a few of which have been investigated at all extensively” (Chard 1974:106). The sites he notes are the same ones described previously by Chang, the microlithic site of Linxi, the Neolithic site of Angangxi, the Hongshan site in Chifeng, and Koguryo sites in Liaodong and Ji’an. In other words, nothing new. There was also no new interpretation of these sites. The only perspective was that of culture history. Any archaeology that had been occurring in the PRC was unknown.

William Watson’s book, Cultural Frontiers in Ancient East Asia, was specifically about the Dongbei, and I used this information later in writing about connections with the Korean peninsula. His approach featured archaeological styles and cultures, separated into regions.

By the late 1970s China was open to American tourists. I planned a travel trip for students, and took them to the usual tourist spots in 1981. In 1982 and 1985, I was able to plan my own tours, and took my students to all the archaeological sites that were open to tourists. About the same time one of my graduate students was able to go on a trip to Dongbei with her geologist husband. Although it was well off the normal tourist beat, I knew that I had to go there.

My student’s connections were magic. I took another graduate student, and was well received by the Liaoning Archaeological Institute, the Liaoning Museum, and
Liaoning University. The trip opened my eyes to the recent
care of archaeology in the Dongbei. We traveled with an interpreter
who became my lifelong friend, and met archaeologists in
Shenyang, Changchun, and Harbin. Everywhere we were
taken to sites and museums. The local archaeologists
answered all our questions. Best of all for me was the site
of Niuheliang, which was at that time completely unknown
outside of China. Guo Dashun and Sun Shoudao told us
that we were the first foreigners to see it. I had been
interested in gender for some time, but was puzzled about
how to study it with archaeological data. I was also
interested in leadership and shamanism. I had written a
paper about the Silla queen in Kyongju Tomb 98 (Nelson
1991). This site seemed of offer an important opportunity
to study everything that interested me, even though I
realized it would be difficult to do.

In the meantime a great ferment of archaeological
activity was occurring in China in the aftermath of the
Cultural Revolution. Peripheral regions in particular were
turning up spectacular discoveries. The Dongbei was one of
these regions, which had captured the interest of Chinese
archaeologists, too. A revolutionary and eventually
foundational paper was written by Su Bingqi, in which he
suggested that there were six regions that contributed to
the formation of Chinese civilization, not just the
Chungyuan region.

In the meantime I was writing The Archaeology of Korea,
and returning to Korea for more advice and information as
often as I could. The relationship between Korean sites and
the Dongbei became ever clearer, as more sites were
excavated in South Korea and Dongbei. Archaeology was
very active in South Korea, with construction of dams and
roads and buildings, and it was difficult to keep up with
all the new publications. Although there was more data
than interpretation, because archaeologists were so busy in
the field, it was an exciting time. Discoveries from the
Bronze Age were particularly important for me, in terms of
relating Korean archaeology to that of the Dongbei, but
Neolithic discoveries tied the two regions together, as well
(Nelson 1992?).

The 1986 revised edition of Chang’s Archaeology of
Ancient China included new information about the Dongbei,
but the material was too new to be well integrated with
earlier data. Nevertheless the sites of Lower Xiajiadian
and Upper Xiajiadian cultures were included. Since Chang’s
research focus was always on Shang, these were still
peripheral regions to him. On my first trip to Dongbei in
1986, I realized how little was known of the richness of
this region, and discussed a book of translations with the
archaeologists of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces.
In 1987, under the auspices of the US agency, Committee
on Scholarly Relations with the People’s Republic of China,
I was able to spend six weeks in Liaoning and Jilin
provinces. Archaeologists accompanied me to new sites, and
we returned to some that I had visited before. It was
especially interesting to see the archaeological sites in
Ji’an, and in Yanbian.

International conferences were organized within China, so
that regions could be studied and discussed. I was able to go to several Hwan Bohai conferences in the 1990s, where I learned both details about sites in Dongbei and the directions of Chinese archaeology, as well as perspectives from Japan and Russia. This had been such a difficult area to study, because of all the different languages that relevant archaeological site reports and interpretations were written in, that these conferences were invaluable in exchanging perspectives, and understanding the goals and methods of the various archaeologies in the region.

Other scholarly interests of the Western world were attracted to Dongbei, as well as Inner Mongolia. The artifacts from the early nomads that were beginning to appear in larger number drew the attention of art historians. Emma Bunker and Katheryn Linduff organized a meeting in the Pittsburgh, and then in Hohhot to discuss new findings and how to interpret them.

In 1994 I had another opportunity to visit Dongbei sites on my way to the Pacific Science Congress in Vladivostok. This time I spent several days visiting sites in eastern Inner Mongolia. At the international meeting, I learned more about the Russian Far East and met archaeologists who excavated there, and who had been to North Korea.

In the meantime, Victor Mair at the University of Pennsylvania, had learned about the mummies of Urumqi, and their possible European connections. Although the mummies were already known outside China, Mair was the first to concentrate on what they might mean historically. Eventually, the interest in mobility and connections with Indo-Europeans (which was a major interest of Mair’s) led to a conference that included linguists and physical anthropologists as well as archaeologists and historians (Mair 1998). Because of the preservation of cloth, the possibilities of tracing people’s movements through their weaving also became part of the data, along with metallurgical analyses.

The Dongbei region was not at the heart of the mummy discussions, and yet it was on the fringes, because the same issues were important. Ethnicity needed to be seriously discussed. Who were the peoples who left their metal objects and evidence of horse domestication in the Dongbei? Were there several different groups? Did they replace each other or co-exist? Some of them had horse-drawn chariots, and others were horse riders. Where did they come from? What was their relationship with central China, and the Sandai? Where did they go? Were they the founders of the southern Korean kingdoms, or the “horse riders” of Japan?

Projects began to be organized in the Dongbei and Inner Mongolia with American co-directors. Gideon Shelach spearheaded what became a joint project between the archaeologists in Chifeng and the University of Pittsburgh, with headquarters in Chifeng. Liaoning Archaeological Research Institute and the University of Denver planned a survey centered on Niuheliang. These projects produced various data.
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III. Current Issues in Dongbei Archaeology

Although there are problems that involve Paleolithic discoveries in Dongbei, I will omit discussion of them here. However, issues arise at the very beginning of the Holocene, and even before. Since the Dongbei cannot be understood in isolation from the surrounding archaeology from Xinjiang to Mongolia to the Russian Far East and Korea, issues for the whole region need to be researched as well.

Two important issues which have always seemed to be tied together are the beginning of the use of pottery containers, and the beginnings of settled life and farming. Very early pottery that has been found in Japan, the Russian Far East, and various parts of China seems to have little to do with Dongbei archaeology. It has been suggested that the connection between early pottery sites was maritime, which would suggest that it would be futile to seek such sites in Dongbei (Aikens and Zhuschchikovskaya, in press).

Either we must suppose that early pottery containers and early plant and animal domestication were unrelated events, or look for much earlier pottery where it has not been found. In any case, the early farming in Dongbei and Inner Mongolia needs additional study. Apparently pigs and millets are just as early in the broad region from western

Inner Mongolia to Liaoning as they are in north China in the Peiligang and Cishan cultures. Sheep are found from the Ordos, in Zhukaikou, to the Hongshan culture. Where did the sheep come from? Did they arrive in domesticated form?

Another pair of questions involves the rise of nomadism in the Dongbei beyond the Zhou state of Yan and the establishment of states, apparently of different ethnicities. The Dongbei polities began to form during the Han dynasty or slightly before. Much can be learned about secondary state formation by a close look at these states. There is some textual material from the Han and later to study the secondary states, but the archaeology of the region is thin. There is more to be learned than just the contents of tombs and their wall paintings, although these are certainly of great interest both historically and visually. Critically in question at the moment is the nature of the states of Koguryeo and Puyeo (Pak 1999). To have a better sense of these entities, earlier sites need to be carefully studied.

Two important books in English have been written about the region just north of the Great Wall, although the reference to the Great Wall underlines the perspective is that from within China, rather than taking the region on its own merits. I was guilty of this, too, in subtitling my book on the archaeology of northeast China, “Beyond the Great Wall.”

The first of these books (The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China) was written by Thomas Barfield, who
in 1989 still had the view that the Great Wall was a boundary “to physically demarcate and separate China from the world of the nomads” (Barfield 1989:16). The fact that he could write that, “horse-riding nomadic pastoralists appeared along the Chinese frontier some time after the beginning of the 4th century BC” is a clear indication of how little was known in the west at that time about Dongbei archaeology. He does, however, make the important distinction between the forests of Manchuria and the grasslands of Mongolia. The Mongols and Manchu and their predecessors were separate people, not only with different ways of life, but with different languages and cultures. Although the Mongols seem to have ridden into the Dongbei from the north or west, Manchu ancestors may well have left the archaeological sites in the forested regions.

Nicola Di Cosmo’s book (Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History) has the benefit of recent archaeological discoveries in Dongbei. He notes of the Northern Zone that, “until the 3rd C. BC, the northern frontier of China remained extremely fluid.” (find page). He also notes that, “It is clear that the Northern Zone of China – largely in today’s Inner Mongolia and Liaoning, and in the northern areas of Shansi, Shaansi, and Hopei – was already an independent cultural unit during the Shang dynasty” (p. 45). Sun Yan’s (2006) archaeological study of the contemporary Yan state and its interactions with “barbarians” gives greater nuance to this observation.

There are a few indications that the world of East Asia was wider than we have described in our archaeological reports. Di Cosmo (2002) discusses Steppe Highways that linked Dongbei with the west. He notes that the Northern Zone implies a connection with the steppe, a northern “steppe highway.” Sites in the Qijia culture also suggest western connections via the more southerly route (Fitzgerald-Huber 1995) which became known as the silk road. Dongbei archaeology insists on these connections (Nelson xxxx (Mair). Both the west and the north of China have early indications of cultural affinities both with the steppes and with the Shang. These include the early use and production of metal, the appearance of domesticated horses, and the production and use of oracle bones.

Although I am not convinced that the concept of a “Jade Age” between Neolithic and Bronze Ages in all of China is useful, some of the jade must have come from Xinjiang. A sequence of jade–using cultures runs down the east coast of China – Hongshan to Longshan to Liangzhu. This is not likely to be accidental. Another example is the clear connection between Lower Xiajiadian and the predecessors of the Shang at Erlitou, in shapes of pottery and pottery decoration, as well as implied ritual similarities. The same is true of relations between Shandong and Shang. Shang connections to the west are suggested not only because of Shang vessels in the Sanxingdui pits, but because some of the jadestone in Fu Hao’s tomb seem to have originated in quarries in Xinjiang Di Cosmo 2002:54). Another connection must be horses – both chariots and horseback
riding, which are connected with Upper Xiajiadian (Di Cosmo 2002:62).

The result of the fascination of the Mongols for western (and Chinese) historians is that the region where the Manchus arose is largely ignored. Owen Lattimore did write about the Manchu in Inner Asian Frontiers of China, but almost nothing is written by historians in the West about their predecessors. One result is that a controversy over the ethnicity or historical roots of the kingdom of Koguryeo has arisen. It is clear that the Koguryeo kingdom was Korean in language affinity and culture. But of course there was no such thing as a polity of “Koreans” at that time, rather, states that were related in the peninsula and islands fought against each other for hegemony. And it is clear that the Korean states, especially Koguryeo and Paekche, absorbed a great deal from Han dynasty China and later. Tomb styles become increasingly influenced by those of China, and the influence of Buddhism can be perceived. Both kingdoms became literate in Chinese, as well as Silla. The very idea of a state make have diffused from China.

In summary, as archaeologists we need to perceive the Dongbei as related to the rest of China and the surrounding regions. It needs to be considered at the center of study, rather than only in relation to central China, or in relation to nomadic cultures. Only then can we truly understand the cultural dynamics of the Dongbei sites themselves.

References

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(한글 요약)
신석기 및 청동기 시대 중국 동북 지역에 대한 서양의 견해
사라 넬슨

동북 고고학에 대한 서양의 관점은 동아시아 고고학자들의 견해와 크게 다르지 않다. 동북 지방은 중국 고고학 분야에서 가장 소홀히 취급되고 있는 지역이지만 필자는 가장 중요한 지역 가운데 하나라고 믿는다. 동북 지역으로부터 우리는 인종집단의 이동, 원거리 무역, 그리고 사상의 확산 등을 목격할 수가 있다. 이 지역은 그들의 정체성을 이해하기 위한 실험실과 같은 지역이다. 우리는 그들의 공간적 이동, 사회 정체 정치적 구조의 변화 등을 통해서 동아시아 여러 민족들의 관계를 이해할 수 있게 된다. 우리는 의식들, 지도력, 이념들 그리고 최근 고고학의 기타 뜨거운 주제들에 관해서도 이해할 수가 있다.

동북지방에 관한 과거의 자료들은 거의 없어서 불완전하기 짝이 없는 기록들과 신뢰할 수 없는 간격만 남아 있다. 한반도 북부 지역에 대한 한 왕조의 정책의 역사 속에서 일부 역사적 정보를 발견하기도 한다. 위 왕조 때 파견된 탐험대가 북쪽으로 이르므로 고까지 여러 종족들에 관한 자료를 제공했지만, 정보는 영성하기 짝이 없다. 대개 이 지역은 중국 서쪽을 잃는 사람들에게는 미지의 영역으로 남아 있었다. 그러나 동북은 고고학 발굴의 결과 역사가 결코 언급한 적이 없는 형태로 그 모습을 세상에 드러내기 시작하고 있다. 고고학 덕택에 이상적 모순으로 지역에 대한 보다 분명한 그림이 그려지고 있다.

서양(중국) 역사학자들이 몽골에 관심을 집중한 결과 대체로 만주족이 일어난 지역이 소홀히 다루어지게 되었다. 라티모어의 [중국의 내륙 아시아 변경 Inner Asian Frontiers of China]에서 만주족에
관해서 다루기는 했지만, 그들의 선조에 관한 서양 역사가가 기록한 것은 거의 아무 것도 없다. 그 한 결과로 고구려의 민족적 역사적 뿌리에 관한 논쟁이 발생하고 있다. 고구려는 언어적 문화적으로 한국 왕조임이 명백하다. 그러나 한국의 단일 정치조직 같은 것은 없었고, 만도와 도서를 둘러싸고 서로 패권을 다투던 국가 들은 있었다. 그리고 한국의 국가들 특히 고구려와 백제가 중국 황조 이후 중국으로부터 많은 것을 흡수한 것도 명백하다. 고분의 양식은 점차 중국의 영향을 받았고, 그리고 불교의 영향도 인지되고 있다. 신라와 마찬가지로 두 왕국 모두 중국의 문자를 사용했다.

요약하면, 고고학자로서 우리는 동북지방을 중국의 다른 지역 그리고 기타 주변 지역과 관련된 곳으로 인식할 필요가 있다. 그러나 동북 지역은 또한 중국의 중심부와 관계 혹은 유목 문화의 관계 속에서 연구되어야 한다. 그 자체 연구의 중심이 되어야 하기도 한다. 그렇게 되었을 때 비로소 우리는 진정으로 동북 지역의 유적들의 문화적 동력을 이해할 수 있게 될 것이다.

주제어 : 신석기시대, 청동기시대, 중국 동북

키워드 : 신석기 시대, 청동기 시대, 중국 동북

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