

History of Korea - Part Three

Michael Downey
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When the first Korean Kingdom, Old Joseon, fell to the Chinese Han empire in BCE 108, it looked like China would be able to exercise its hegemony for a long time to come. But a variety of native Koreans had something different to say about that.

By the end of the era known as BCE, tribal confederations were forming up from North to South on the peninsula. For me, it was kind of like the old West with no sheriff or marshal to take your troubles to. It was every man, village, and tribe for himself. The strongest would survive, expand and usually, in a vicious fight, somebody having your back was advantageous. Out of this basic need confederations began to form, break up, and reform.

These included remnants of older people traversing the territory known as Manchuria. The Yemaek people seemed to be made up of the Ye, tiger people, and Maek, bear people. Later they were said to constitute the people of Old Joseon. When Old Joseon fell, the people who survived were widely scattered and were incorporated into Buyeo. The Buyeo in turn were considered to be the ancestors of Goguryeo and Baekje, two of the three kingdoms in Korea. The Goguryeo, Baekje, Buyeo and Gaya are all believed to have originated from the Yemaek tribes. The Yemaek culture is seen as ancestral to the modern culture of Korea.

Far to the north, the horsemen of the Goguryeo tribe, based on their military prowess, began to put together the remnants of Old Joseon. Blending Yemaek people with Buyeo leadership and strongly influenced by the Chinese commanderies, Goguryeo developed into a kingdom. As aggressive mounted warriors, they expanded control over territory in Northeast China, Northern Korea, Southern Korea and as far north as Russia. China claims Goguryeo as a minority nation of greater China. Koreans of course know that Goguryeo was one of the foundational three kingdoms of Korea.

All the while, in the southernmost extents of the peninsula other confederations began to form with connections to Goguryeo. Samhan was the confederation of three Han tribes, Byeohan, Jinhan, and Manhan. The Samhan, a loose confederation of walled-town states, each appear to have had a ruling elite, whose power mixed politics and shamanism. Although each state appears to have had its own ruler, no evidence exists of systematic succession. The name of the poorly understood Jin state continued to be used in the name of the Jinhan confederacy and in the name Byeonjin, an alternate term for Byeonhan. In addition, for some time the leader of Mahan continued to call himself the King of Jin, asserting nominal overlordship over all of the Samhan confederations.

Mahan confederacy

Mahan, a loose confederacy of chiefdoms that existed from around the first century BCE to the third century CE in the southern Korean peninsula in the Chungcheong Province. Arising out of the confluence of Gojoseon/Old Joseon migration and the Jin federation, Mahan constituted one of the Samhan (or "Three Hans"), along with Byeonhan and Jinhan. Baekje began as a member statelet, but later overtook all of Mahan and became one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea. The folks who migrated from the fallen Gojoseon were Ye Maek people related by blood and language to the Goguryeo people. Migration of people from Gojoseon had a great influence on this region and the Sam Han confederations. Known as the proto-three kingdoms they played a large part in forming the people and nations of the Three Kingdoms

period.

All three future kingdoms began in similar circumstances and developed following similar paths. They all began as war-like tribes who secured their places on the peninsula and began to expand by conquest and primitive diplomacy. Kingdom founding dates are difficult to pin down. They all began the rise to nationhood after the fall of Old Joseon in 108 BCE. Goguryeo is said to be founded between 200 BCE and 37 BCE by Ju Mong/Chumo/King Dongmyeong, a leader of one of the Buyeo tribes. Originating in Northern Manchuria, Buyeo was associated with the Yemaek people who were instrumental in founding Old Joseon, Goguryeo, and Baekje.

The founding of Goguryeo is lost in overlapping and conflicting myths. At best, the TV Drama has proclaimed Ju Mong to be the legendary founder of Goguryeo. His father was Mosu, a divine being who is said to have descended from heaven. His mother is Lady Yuhwa, a mortal woman who fell in love with Hae Mosu. Ju Mong was raised by King Geumwa of Buyeo, after his mother sought refuge there. What we can say for sure is that Goguryeo warriors rode and fought hard. They expanded their kingdom to Russia in the far north, most of the Chinese territory of Manchuria, most of North Korea, and much of Korea to and below the Han river. They valiantly contested the rule of the Korean peninsula until their defeat by the Chinese Tang dynasty allied with Shilla in 668 CE.

Out of the royal family politics arose a situation typical of royal families everywhere which would grow into another of the three kingdoms, Baekje. Ju Mong, the founder of Goguryeo, had three sons. The eldest, he left in Buyeo when he departed to found the new kingdom. In Goguryeo he sired two more sons with a second wife, Soseono. When he brought the eldest son down from Buyeo and declared him as heir, Soseono decided to flee with her two sons and they fled South to start a new nation. Onjo, the second son of Ju Mong established the nation and ruled as the first King. He called it tens of counties or vassals. Later it was changed to Baekje or hundreds of vassals or counties. He located it in the Han river basin in Wiryeseong or present day Hanam just south and east of Seoul. He built a fortress called Wiryeseongsan and worshiped on a mountain setting up an altar calling them both Kamdansan 감단산. I've climbed that mountain many times and looked over the Han river and the city of Seoul. The ruins of Wiryeseongsan was also a place for picnicking and hiking. I enjoyed living in a place where I could walk among history.