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### Title

Building a Foundation for Korean Archaeology as World Archaeology

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Scene from the first joint international excavations in almost 40 years between the Early Korea Project, the University of Michigan, and two Korean buried cultural heritage excavation institutes in May 2011. Photo courtesy of Rachel Lee.

## Building a Foundation for Korean Archaeology as World Archaeology

Building a Foundation for Korean Archaeology as World Archaeology – **Martin T. Bale** and **Mark Byington** (Early Korea Project, Harvard University)

From our point of view, there are problematic issues with the archaeologies of Korea and Japan that developed from distinct historical reasons, but the result of the problem is the same in both places. That is to say, the meaningful exposure of the global academic archaeology community and the general public to the prehistory, proto-history and early history of the two countries is quite limited. This lack of awareness and/or exposure problem is even more acute in what Olsen (1991) calls the metropolises of academic archaeology, i.e. in the top universities and museums of United States and the UK. One can see this in any introductory textbook by Fagan, Renfrew and Bahn, and others. Korea and Japan are reduced to the role of inconsequential satellites in comparison to the kinds of archaeology that are popular in the metropolises of the US and UK.

In the words of the archaeologist and Professor Sasaki Ken'ichi of Meiji University, this is “tragic” because the rich archaeological data from Japan (and conversely, Korea) offer enormous promise to help push forward the major research questions of our field from a global perspective: the origins and intensification of agriculture, the evolution and devolution of complex societies, the development of urbanism, and more. Given the nature of the preservation of material culture these questions may never be completely resolved, but archaeological data from these two countries offer a comparative perspective of great depth that seems to only be paid lip service by luminaries and mover-shakers in the metropolises of academic archaeology. The potential positive effect of Area Studies, which theoretically should include and actively foster archaeological research on Japan and Korea and help to interface the results in a multi-disciplinary way with the wider academic community, has been insufficient thus far, with the exceptions of the Early Korea Project (EKP) at Harvard University and the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Culture. Our particular hope is that the Early Korea Project can make a contribution to remediate these problems through lectures, workshops and high quality, authoritative publications (see below).

We know the case of Korean archaeology best, and so the following comments are based on our experiences in that region. Until the mid-1990s, academic archaeology in Korea was a small field dominated by the excavation and interpretation of ancient archaeological features that were visible on the surface: megaliths of the Mumun Pottery Period (or the so-called ‘Bronze Age’, c. 1500-300 BC) and mounded tombs of the Three Kingdoms Period (c. AD 300-668). The propagation of knowledge about Korean archaeology has been inhibited not only by language differences but also the lingering hangover from colonisation by Japan (1910-1945) and reactionary nationalist interpretations of material culture that followed. Such interpretations have

distorted the archaeological record and have allowed detractors to paint all of Korean archaeology with the same negative and dismissive brush. As South Korea steadily became more economically prosperous due to manufacturing and export policies of the national government, substantial infrastructure construction and housing development began. Korean heritage protection legislation specifies that archaeological investigations must occur before major construction projects start, and this has led to a great explosion of archaeological excavations that continues unabated. The Korean Peninsula may appear small on a world map, but the archaeological data available to investigate the big questions of archaeology are considerable. The settlement, mortuary, and production data that have resulted from excavations of the last 15 years is startlingly massive and highly useful. The salvage/emergency excavation industry in Korea now rivals that of Japan, which is better known in the Anglosphere. In Korea these developments have transformed archaeology into a vibrant and relevant field. These data have much to contribute to dialogues and theoretical model building in world archaeology, but even with the advances of recent decades the majority of it exists as ‘grey literature’ in Korean language only.

To help offset the problems mentioned above, the Early Korea Project (or EKP, <http://tinyurl.com/ny6fyu> <http://on.fb.me/icwaig> <http://bit.ly/hRsqTW>) was established at the Korea Institute, Harvard University in late 2006, with generous support from the Academy of Korean Studies and the Korea Foundation. The Northeast Asian History Foundation of Seoul provides programme funding. The mission of the EKP is to promote and direct the development of academic studies of early Korean history and archaeology prior to the 11th century in the English language, primarily through lectures, workshops and publications. The EKP takes a multi-disciplinary, comparative approach to the study of Korea and relies on active relationships with scholars in Korea and the engagement of scholars elsewhere whose research involves early Korea. These fields include not only archaeology and early history but also various sub-disciplines of anthropology and art history. This should come as no surprise for those trained in archaeology, but the EKP includes NE China and western Japan in its coverage. This bears mentioning given the fact that modern nation states of Northeast Asia had not formed before the 11th century and national boundaries, territories, and cultures are contested in the present.

In the next three to five years we hope that the EKP can improve the state of knowledge about archaeological research on early Korea in English, encourage undergraduates to major in Korean archaeology as postgraduate students in the metropolises and beyond, inspire archaeologists in the Anglosphere to engage in research on early Korea, and thus lessen the Olsenian satellite status of

Korean archaeology. In addition, through our work we hope to show archaeology professors in expanding university departments in the Anglosphere that they should strongly consider hiring tenure-track faculty whose major research is on the archaeology of Korea. Hiring committees need to consider that there is more to East Asian archaeology than China, after all! Over the medium term we optimistically envision a time when the efforts of the EKP will help Korean archaeology, prehistory, and early history find an appropriately prominent place in the field of Korean Studies and assist in breaking down disciplinary differences between the humanities and the social sciences. Through the activities of the EKP we are working to contribute to an atmosphere in which archaeologists can use data from Korea that will substantially add to the creation of comparative theoretical models for world archaeology that will benefit a holistic understanding of the past over the long-term.

## **References Cited**

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