

North Korean Nationalism:

Reading the Paleolithic Text

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North Korea, after over seven decades since establishment, continues to be poorly understood. The paucity of knowledge regarding the country is not only a matter of the lack of access to factual data; understanding of the country's ideological tenets and its denizens' values and beliefs remains superficial. The implications of this scantiness run deeper: failure to fully understand the cultural and historical frames of reference of North Korea as a state and people leads to stereotypes, misperceptions, and even contributes to confrontation. The purpose of this brief paper is to explore and gain a better grasp of North Korea's sense of national identity through the lens of Paleolithic archaeology – a dimension largely overlooked in analyses of North Korea, at least in the West.

Introduction

This paper examines a recent significant archaeological excavation near Pyongyang and how this links to North Koreans' self-perceptions of themselves in the world. Ranging from their common sense to their principal ideologies, all the notions of belief residing within North Koreans' minds remain almost impossible to grasp. One of many reasons behind this impossibility is the quasi-complete absence of mutual sharing of beliefs and values. The lack of communication on these issues inevitably causes misunderstandings and, subsequently, confrontation.

How can the world overcome such difficulties? Of course, one cannot expect easy answers to this dilemma. However, one thing remains certain; experts tend to look at the immediately pressing and conspicuous issues, such as the challenges posed by the North Korea's increased military capabilities, the peace process, and declarations and sanctions against North Korea, to name just a few examples. However, this does not mean that these are necessarily not important, but the matter is that the failure of these issues' reconciliation stemmed from issues that are often dismissed as irrelevant.

Hangmok-ri Excavation

North Korea's news media sporadically release information about archaeological excavations, with one of the latest cases being the Hangmok-ri site, discovered in the spring of 2020. Hangmok-ri is located in Gangdong County in Pyongyang City, and it is a cave site that shows seemingly stratified archaeological layers that date from the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze periods. According to South Korean news agencies that directly quote North Korean outlets, the Paleolithic artifacts could be between 34,000–36,000 years old, based on scientific dating methods such as ESR (Electron spin resonance) and TL (Thermoluminescence) datings.¹

North Korean sources explain that Gangdong County yields various ranges of archaeological cultural remains. It is one of the birthplaces of the modern *Joseon Minjok* (ethnic Koreans). This claim is bolstered by the fact that the tomb of *Dangun*, who is regarded as the founding father of *Gojoseon*, believed to be the first state founded by Koreans in 2333 B.C.E, is located close by.²

“... the North Korean archaeological interpretation [maintains that a] lineage has persisted from the Paleolithic [...] right up to today's ethnic Korean people.”

If these artifacts from the Hangmok-ri Paleolithic site are indeed as old as is claimed, the site belongs to the Upper Paleolithic period. However, the question does not concern scientific dating, but rather

the claim that the site is the place of origin of the *Joseon Minjok*, which would represent a continuous biological lineage from a very remote time period. If the North Korean archaeological interpretation is to be believed, it can be summarized that an unbroken lineage has persisted from the Paleolithic through the Neolithic and the Bronze period populations right up to today's ethnic Korean people.³

It would appear implausible that today's Korean population can be directly traced back tens of thousands of years in such a manner. However, for North Koreans, this is not merely simple rhetoric but rather a clear statement. Not only do they claim to be direct descendants of *Dangun* and his people, but also that the origins of Koreans as an ethnically (including biologically and culturally) homogeneous group has endured from the Paleolithic period up until the present day. These claims by North Korea have been repeatedly put forward, consistently updated, and backed by new archaeological research data.

The Bloodline during the Paleolithic

In order to understand the issues related to the biological and cultural variation through the Paleolithic period in North Korea, it is necessary to present a brief overview of human evolution and Paleolithic cultural periods. The result of the classification of the human species and the Paleolithic cultures in the course of evolution tend to be varied by different scholars based on different criteria. However, from a general perspective, human evolution began about 6-7 million years ago. Mankind as a whole, from this time forward, was collectively called hominin.⁴

Among them, the genus *Homo* appeared about 2 million years ago. *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*,

Homo heidelbergensis, *Homo neanderthalensis*, and *Homo sapiens* belong to this genus *Homo*. Of course, many more species have been discovered and are being recognized by paleoanthropological studies. Of these, we, modern human (i.e. *Homo sapiens*), first appeared in Africa about 200,000 years ago (or about 300,000 years ago).⁵

The classification of cultures through human behavior is based on archaeological evidence, the main criterion being with the stone artifacts. Although the initial hominin had emerged 6-7 million years ago, but the first appearance of stone tools may be 2.5 million years old.⁶ The most relevant hominin capable of knapping first, rudimentary tool-kits are generally recognized as *Homo habilis* or the early forms of genus *Homo*.⁷ This cultural period is called the Lower Paleolithic period.

More elaborate stone tools appeared about 300,000 years ago, during the so-called the Middle Paleolithic period.⁸ The relevant species seemingly capable to make them was *Homo neanderthalensis*. After that, the most sophisticated and complex stone tools emerged about 40,000 years ago according to Western standards. This techno-complex period is defined as the Upper Paleolithic period.

Among the current hypotheses regarding the origins of modern human is the Out of Africa theory (recent African origin model), which dominates the current evolutionary debate.⁹ Namely that all *Homo sapiens* originated from Africa and subsequently colonized the rest of the world.

Albeit aware of this global paleoanthropological view of human evolution and hominin diversification through time and space, North Koreans, dif-

fering from this conventional classification, have generated a rather unique scheme of human evolution with a specific narrative revolving around the *Joseon Minjok* bloodline. This scheme is a step-like evolutionary process combines the theories of biological human evolution with ethnic nationalism, to highlight the presence of an ethnically homogeneous (biologically and culturally) group that developed indigenously and independently. In other words, it emphasizes that changes in people and culture change constantly in one direction, while underscoring that all changes occur on the Korean Peninsula without external influence.

“... according to the North Korean perspective, the inhabitation of *Homo sapiens*, which is called *Shinin* in North Korea, dates back to 40,000 years ago.”

Due to North Korea's archaeological explanation, the Out of Africa model is hard to be accepted. It is difficult to recognize that North Korea has experienced an outside influx of any non-indigenous populations. As such, according to the North Korean perspective, the inhabitation of *Homo sapiens* which is called *Shinin* in North Korea dates back to 40,000 years ago.¹⁰ This population originated from a formally-inhabiting hominin group, *Goin* (archaic *Homo sapiens*), who dominated the Korean Peninsula during the Middle Paleolithic period. In turn, this group evolved from *Wonin* (*Homo erectus*), who lived on the Peninsula more than one million years ago.¹¹ It should be noted that the number of homi-

nin-bearing sites in North Korea is unquestionably larger than those of South Korea. Therefore, it is emphasized that North Korea's claim is based on actual hominin fossils and Paleolithic artifacts.

The centrality of the Korean bloodline through time prompts questions about how far back in time this lineage can be traced and connected to the origins of the *Joseon Minjok*. At first glance, the answer would be: Koreans can claim biological and cultural descendancy from the *Gojoseon* people. Yet, the question remains, where did the *Gojoseon* people come from? One should consider territorial homogeneity is important. They could not deviate from the Peninsula. This single ethnic group basically evolved indigenously.

North Korean archaeologists thus claim the *Joseon Minjok* originated from the archaic *Joseon* people who previously lived in the same location during the Neolithic.¹² The temporal extension goes further back to the Paleolithic period. There are no episodes of migration or diffusion during the peopling of the Korean Peninsula, as these Paleolithic people are also an indigenous population.

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So far, there are no reports about the discovery of hominin fossils at the Hangmok-ri Paleolithic site. According to accumulated archaeological data, Hangmok-ri artifacts were possibly made by *Homo sapiens* which is called *Shinin* in North Korean context.

This model of a single unadulterated ethnic Korean identity originating in the Paleolithic period has an impact that goes beyond simple archaeological debates and classification. As such, it is necessary to also understand how archaeology has been appropriated by the ideological agenda of North Korean nationalism.

Ideological Evolution

The ideology from the early period of North Korea focused on Marxism-Leninism and the creation of a socialist country. Accordingly, the Workers' Party of Korea pursued and carried out “Sovietization” after 1945. Proletarian internationalism was favored over nationalism, which was seen as a “bourgeois” element.¹³ For reference, the concept of nation is understood as a Soviet term and is quoted from Stalin: a nation is a people who share the same territory, language, culture, and economy.¹⁴

However, at the end of the 1950s, nationalism in North Korea was partly interpreted as a form of socialist patriotism, which combined the notions of proletarianism and nationalism. These were incorporated and formalized into the state ideology of Juche introduced in 1958 by Kim Il Sung.¹⁵ By the 1960s, the ideas of nation and nationalism were mentioned in the “Kim Il Sung Instructions”.¹⁶

In North Korea, Kim's instructions possess an extremely strong defining power. In fact, they have a stronger binding force than the constitution.¹⁷ The instructions relating to the nation and *Dangun* are as follows: “Through the excavation of the Dangun Tomb, we found our founder ... Now we are proud to announce that we are a homogeneous nation with the founder Dangun”.¹⁸ Once the supreme leader concludes that all Koreans are ethnically homog-

enous and descendants of the first original ancestor *Dangun*, no alternative answer is permissible.

Furthermore, Kim Jung Il's instructions were also quite specific in the case of the Paleolithic peopling of North Korea. He stated: "the presence of the Paleolithic period in Korea is far beyond a simple academic matter, it is a very important matter which is directly related to our nation's perpetual history in particular, our nation's origin".¹⁹ These instructions underscore the serious importance of the Paleolithic period for the sake of national enterprise, regardless of its remoteness in time.

After the 1980s, North Korean nationalism began to manifest itself in even more radical ways. During the Kim Jong Il period, the primary ideologies became *Songun Jeongchi* (military first policy) and *Chosun minjok cheil jui* (Korea is the best policy). Nationalism became a more profound ideology.²⁰ A new concept of nation was introduced, consisting of language, territory, culture and bloodline. Instead of a Marxist-Stalinist nation, an altered concept of nation was introduced. Of these components, the most important one is bloodline.

Over time, therefore, North Korea's brand of nationalism (so called ethnic nationalism) has evolved towards a focus on bloodline inheritance, with the perpetuation and transmission of the Korean lineage through birth serving as the most important aspect.

The deep roots of ethnic nationalism possibly stem from xenophobia and trauma, resulting from the wounds of foreign engagements.²¹ North Koreans continue to feel aggrieved by the Japanese occupation that lasted until the end of World War II and American military intervention during the Korean War. The nationalistic nature of North Korea

coupled with xenophobia has generated an extreme attitude that revolves around bloodline nationalism.

Because of this emphasis on lineage, the characteristic feature of "Korean-ness" is that it is something inherited, not to be made. Since the primary concern of this newly defined nation is bloodline, which can only be physical transmitted, foreign individuals are de facto excluded from becoming Koreans.

South Koreans, of course, partially share their ethnic identity with North Koreans. They also express national pride and national identity. Regardless of the labels of "North" and "South," they share a similar nationalistic mindset encompassing: territory (Korean Peninsula), language (Korean), culture (Korean culture), and people (Korean).²² The fundamental difference between the North and South is found, however, in the presence of strong political encoding when addressing the nationalistic idea.

“... North Korea's brand of nationalism has evolved towards a focus on bloodline inheritance, with the perpetuation and transmission of the Korean lineage...”

As such, *Joseon Minjok* has been politicized for the sake of cementing the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. In fact, the term *Joseon Minjok* is incorporated into the expression *Kim Il Sung Minjok*.²³ In so doing, Kim Il Sung is lauded as the true leader vested with maintaining the *Joseon Minjok*. Simply put, without him, there would be no *Joseon Minjok*.²⁴ This ethnic identity, with a very specific concomitant interpretation of Koreans' past, has therefore

become a politically charged tool at the very core of the North Korean state system and its ideology.

Conclusion

The story of Hangmok-ri site is the continuation of decades of North Korean Paleolithic archaeological research. It is not simply a Paleolithic story, however. It begins with Paleolithic artifacts but leads to questions about the current *Joseon Minjok*. According to North Korea, ethnic Koreans display not only a consistent cultural identity, but also a homogeneous biological entity which developed indigenously and independently as far back as the Paleolithic some tens of thousands of years ago. As such, the archaeological work being done at the Hangmok-ri Paleolithic site is not simply a matter of academic progress, but in fact serves an important nationalistic agenda of extending the concept of “Korean-ness” and an undiluted bloodline far back in time. Most critically, this notion of Korean “exceptionalism” offers a clear glimpse into the beliefs of North Koreans. ■

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Endnotes

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