Ancient Koreans and Xiongnu: What was the Nature of Their Relationship?

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Today's scholarship considers the Xiongnu culture a subject of Central Asian studies, and Korean culture, a subject of Far East Asian studies. Indeed, by the time the Xiongnu and Koreans made their appearance in history, they were two distinct peoples. But what was their relationship before then? It is very difficult to answer such a question. Whereas archaeological sources give us little to nothing, we only can guess, from historical sources, that the two peoples shared some cultural affinities whose nature and characteristics have yet to be investigated.

This paper is to be considered a starting point, not the point of arrival. By proposing an attractive hypothesis supported by an extensive bibliography, including even Greek and Latin sources, this paper intends to open an academic debate involving the specialists of Central and East Asia. In other words, this paper is to be regarded as a call for further studies on a so far neglected topic. The author hypothesizes a possible primitive identity between ancient Koreans and the Xiongnu. Although well aware of the difficulty of the subject, the author thinks there is ample material to jumpstart an academic debate. Doubts will be raised and disputes with ensue, and these are indispensable processes for true academic progress. By means of this provocative paper, the author hopes to open a discussion that will help overcome the obstacle of interdisciplinary barriers between Central Asian studies, East Asian studies, and other relevant fields.

Keywords: Koreans-Xiongnu, Tängri-Dangun, Buyeo-Xiongnu, Goguryeo-Xiongnu, Korea's origins

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This paper deals with a number of historical and cultural aspects pertaining to the ancient Korean kingdoms of Buyeo (扶餘) and Goguryeo (高句麗), with particular reference to the relationship between Buyeo-Goguryeo and Central Asian cultures, such as that of the Xiongnu (匈奴). This paper also represents the first stage of a project I started in Korea in the summer of 2006 at the invitation of the Goguryeo Research Foundation (高句麗研究財團). At that time, I concentrated mainly on gathering primary and secondary sources on the subject, and much of the data I had obtained then is still being processed. Therefore, this paper represents a preliminary study whose main purpose is to establish certain points to be developed and deepened through further research. My findings so far comprise only a small part of my work. Nevertheless, I also believe they provide me and other scholars exciting points of departure. I will start here with my hypotheses.

I. Hypotheses

The Chinese insist on the "non-Koreanity" of the Goguryeo kingdom (as well as its actual "independence").[1] I think—and this is one of the purposes of my study—that at least a part of the historical truth of the matter can be uncovered through the examination and correct interpretation of relevant Chinese historical sources. From the perspective of scholarship, a major problem lies in the fact that since the very beginning, Korea has not been as widely studied as China, especially in the western world. Some scholars dealing with Korean matters cannot even read Korean, or they simply ignore Korean sources, even if the sources are written in Chinese characters. The fact of the matter is that Chinese influence on Manchuria and Korea at the time of Buyeo and early Goguryeo is anything but clear. Thus, it may have been exaggerated in Chinese sources and modern scholars' interpretations of them. Consider the following example. In 12 CE, Goguryeo rejected the request of China's ruler Wang Mang (王莽) (r.9 – 23CE) for Goguryeo to join China in a military campaign against the Xiongnu (Gardiner, 1969; Hinsch, 2004[2]). This resulted in a clash between Goguryeo and China. I will deal with this episode in terms of Goguryeo-Xiongnu relations later in the paper. As for now, I can state that this important historical fact demonstrates at least two things:

A) From very early on—i.e., the early 1st century—Goguryeo had an independent foreign policy, possibly as a consequence of its independent political status. It is difficult to say if the Goguryeo people of this episode effectively belonged to the Goguryeo kingdom; they may

[1] This is the core of the polemic between Chinese and Korean scholars apropos Goguryeo (Kim Hyeon-suk, 2005; Sin, 2003).

[2] Both scholars, however, fail to deal with the Korean bibliography on the subject, and this, perhaps, leads them to overestimate the influence exerted by China on Korea during the so-called Proto-Three Kingdoms Period

have been a tribe or tribes of Goguryeo ethnicity but living beyond the borders of the Goguryeo state. Nevertheless, the importance of this report is undeniable. It is a fact that Goguryeo's leader was called "hu"(侯, marquis) in most sources from around 12 CE. However, Goguryeo's leader was called "wang" (王, king) in Hou Han Shu (後漢書), which was completed in the 5th century. Is the later (but presumably impartial) text more reliable? Do the earlier sources reflect a bias induced by the political situation of that period?

B) Goguryeo was strong enough to challenge China's military power.

The events during Wang Mang's reign provide us with an opportunity to initiate, from a broader perspective, research concerning the relations between Goguryeo (and its predecessor, namely Buyeo in Manchuria) and the Chinese empire. On the basis of the episode mentioned above, we can assume that Goguryeo enjoyed friendly relations with the Xiongnu, and this is exactly one of the key points I intend to develop in the course of my study. Close interstate relations are often associated with shared cultural features. Therefore, an in-depth investigation of the relationship between the two peoples could go as far as to establish the possibility of a common origin. As a matter of fact, the Buyeo-Goguryeo kingdoms and the Xiongnu empire seem to have shared similar cultural traits as well as a generally hostile attitude toward China. Indeed, it would seem that the Korean peninsula had friendly links with the Xiongnu from the time of Wiman Joseon (衛滿朝鮮) (ca.190-108 BCE).

I will not elaborate at length on the linguistic aspect of the Goguryeo-Xiongnu linkage. Nevertheless, I do want to point out that if a linkage between the Goguryeo language and that of the Xiongnu—of which even less is known than the Goguryeo language—could in fact be unraveled, it could serve to support the common primitive identity shared by the two peoples and shed light on the role Goguryeo played on the Korean peninsula. As aforementioned, some Chinese scholars claim

(especially from the political perspective) the "non-Koreanity" of the Goguryeo kingdom—the "true Korea" being only Baekje (百濟) and Silla (新羅). However, Chinese historical sources themselves report that the languages of Goguryeo and Baekje were almost the same; thus, if Baekje was a Korean state (and nobody doubts that), then Goguryeo was a Korean state too, at least from an ethno-linguistic point of view. Indeed, the substantial cultural similarities between Baekje and Goguryeo are repeatedly attested to in Chinese sources (e.g., Xin Tang Shu, 220), and this observation can extend to include Silla as well (Sui Shu, 81). Now, let us get to the core of my research—the Xiongnu and the Korean peninsula, with particular reference to Buyeo and Goguryeo.

II. The Xiongnu Empire

In spite of the extensive bibliography on Goguryeo, Goguryeo's relationship with the Xiongnu remains shrouded in mystery. More precisely, the subject has rarely been touched upon. In a more general sense, it may be said that, in spite of the large body of research that has been done on the Xiongnu and other ancient peoples of the steppes (Maenchen-Helfen, 1973; Grousset, 1970; Kwanten, 1979; Roux, 1988),[3] the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Korean peninsula in the delicate period from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE has not yet been fully investigated. Thus, it has been rightly pointed out that there is a shortage of studies concerning the relations between the various ancient peoples of Northeast Asia (Duncan, 2007). A welcome exception is Yi Jong-ho's research. Yi hypothesizes a close relationship between the people of Goguryeo and the Xiongnu—if not a common ethno-cultural identity—based on the two peoples' long-lasting amity (Yi, 2003; Yi,

[3] Needless to say, the historical events regarding Xiongnu and China have received much attention both by western (Barfield, 1989; Hulsewé, 1979; Lattimore, 1951) and eastern scholars (Sawada, 1996; Kato, 1998; Lin, 1984; Lin, 1986).

2004). There is just one problem with his work: Yi may be stretching it somewhat in attrib uting Korean characteristics to the Huns—also recorded by western historians of Late Antiquity (Rohrbacher, 2002)—who ravaged Western Europe between the 4th and 5th centuries. However, Attila and the Huns appear more closely related to the Turks. The name "Attila" itself seems to have Turkic origins since "*at*" (horse) and "*ata*" [father] are both Turkic words. This segues to the language used by the Xiongnu. Did they speak a Turkic language? They probably did not (Deny et al., 1959, p. 685 ff.). And if not, how much did the Turks borrow from the Xiongnu language? We will encounter the same issue later with a discussion of the term "*chengli*" (撐犁).[4] The other problem is the identification of the Xiongnu with Attila's Huns—an identification that is possible, though not definite, given the temporal gap separating Attila from the "Golden Age" of the Xiongnu empire. I will elaborate on this issue later. As for now, let us try to deal with the origins and formation of the Xiongnu empire.

Even if the Xiongnu still remain a mysterious people, we know that at their peak (2nd century BCE), they controlled a vast expanse of territory stretching along a west-east axis from Lake Aral to the Korean peninsula. All we know about them comes from Chinese historical sources. Given the antagonism between the Chinese and the Xiongnu, the portrayal of the Xiongu in these sources is understandably skewed and negative. The Chinese characters used for "Xiongnu" mean "savage slaves" or "screaming, turbulent slaves." They are, of course, just phonetic transcriptions of a foreign name. While we do not know what the Xiongnu referred to themselves, it would be safe to assume that they did not call or consider themselves "slaves."

The Xiongnu do not seem to have left their mark in any western

[4] However, we do have to take into consideration that in many cases, the traditional Chinese pronunciation is quite different from the modern one, and that there are many unresolved issues regarding ancient Chinese phonology (Pulleyblank, 1962; Pulleyblank, 1984; Baxter, 1992).

source. This is certainly very strange for such an expansive empire. Perhaps, they were the "Phaunoi" mentioned by Strabo (*Apollodorus apud Strabonem*, XI, 11)[5] or the "Thuni" mentioned by Plinius (VI, 55). However, neither is backed by definitive evidence. The absence of meaningful references to the Xiongnu in western classical historiography could be due to the fact that large volumes of Greek and Latin sources have gotten damaged or lost over the years. In short, the only reasonable (though anything but sure) hypothesis we can draw for the time being seems to be a generic identification of a branch of the Xiongnu with the Huns, w ho played an important role in the so-called barbarian invasions of Europe at the time of the Later Roman empire—even if, as I have already said, the temporal gap may appear too wide between the Xiongnu empire (2nd century BCE) and the time of Attila (around 450 CE). The issue remains unresolved.

While the true identity of the Xiongnu remains shrouded in mystery, it is certain that for China, the Xiongnu were a formidable opponent for centuries. While the Chinese reported numerous defeats as well as victories against the Xiongnu, they never won any decisive victory against the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu empire's collapse is due to, above all else, its own internal, structural weakness of being composed of so many different clans and tribes. Nonetheless, they were skilled warriors. Their battle tactics, which involved the heavy use of mounted archers—typical to all nomadic peoples of the steppes, often overwhelmed Chinese armies that comprised primarily of infantry. This weakness of the Chinese army was well perceived by Emperor Wu (武帝) (r. 141-87 BCE) of the Han empire. He asked the king of Dayuan (大宛, Ferghana: a region corresponding roughly to parts of today's Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) for many horses. When the king of Dayuan

[5] See also *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*, IIIC. Dionisius the Periegetes (*Periegesis*, 752) mentions "Phrouroi," Orosius (*Hist. adv. paganos*, I, 2, 45) mentions "Funi," while Avienus (*Descriptio*, 926) mentions "Phruri."

refused, Emperor Wu declared war. The war lasted from 104 to 101 BCE, and China emerged victorious. Three thousands horses were brought to China from Dayuan and Emperor Wu himself wrote a poem celebrating "the heavenly horses of the far west" (*Shiji*, 123; *Han Shu*, 6).

At least according to early historic references, the Xiongnu came from Manchuria, near where the Donghu (東胡) lived. The Donghu were a tribe or tribal union in Northeast China that included ancient Koreans. Many noteworthy tombs (perhaps of kings) attributable to the Xiongnu culture found in Manchuria seem to confirm their Manchurian origin. The first significant clash with the Chinese army occurred in 245 BCE (Shiji, 110; Han Shu, 94) when Li Mu (李牧), a commander of the Zhao (趙), defeated the Xiongnu, the Donghu, and other "barbarian" peoples in the same military campaign. Soon after China's unification, the Xiongnu suffered another attack from the Qin (秦) (214 BCE). Touman (頭曼), the shanyu (單于, king or ruler) of the Xiongnu, fled north. Touman's successor, Mao Dun (also known as Mo Du, 冒頓) (r. 209-174 BCE), is considered the greatest Xiongnu ruler. He was the founder of the Xiongnu empire. He subjugated all the nearby peoples, including the Dingling (丁零, proto-Uighurs(?)) and Yuechi (月氏). He even forced some of the Yuechi to migrate. The second wave of migration was caused by Lao Shang, a Xiongnu ruler, who crushed the Yuechi around 170 BCE. These two instances prove the importance of the Xiongnu in Asian history. The Yuechi, in fact, are the very Tocharians who conquered the Indo-Greek kingdoms of Bactriana. They also later founded the Kushana kingdom (Haloun, 1937; Bussagli, 1970; Maenchen-Helfen, 1945). It must be noted that this was in Central Asia, an area that had already been affected by earlier migrations (Jettmar, 1951, pp. 135-223; Jettmar, 1996, pp. 215-221). In particular, Mo Du defeated and incorporated the Donghu after forming an alliance with them (*Shiji*, 110; Han Shu, 94; Mullie, 1968-69; Pak Seong-ho, 1988). This last episode is especially important. On the one hand, it means that the Xiongnu extended their territory so far eastward as to border the Korean peninsula; on the other

hand, it was exactly around 190 BCE. (i.e., during Mo Du's reign) that the so-called Wiman Joseon was founded. Whatever the truth about the nature of the state of Wiman Joseon—whose existence is only reported in certain historical sources and has not yet been archaeologically verified, we are informed that Wiman, the founder, was a man of Yan (燕) who had presumably taken refuge among the Xiongnu (*Shiji*, 115) and later defeated King Jun (準王) of Gojoseon (古朝鮮). Unraveling the facts about Gojoseon, starting from the question of whether it even existed or not, poses an extremely complicated challenge (Song, 2003; Pak Gyeong-cheol, 2005; *Goguryeo, Balhae munhwa*, 2005; Butin, 1990), but, in any case, there is no doubt that the Xiongnu were in some way involved in the founding of Wiman Joseon. In this regard, a suggestive hypothesis I dare to advance here is that Wiman could have been for the Xiongnu a trustworthy official (Chinese or Korean?) who was given by Mo Du the job of controlling and managing the affairs of a part of the Korean peninsula in the name of an alliance with the Xiongnu themselves. In other words, I suspect that Wiman Joseon could have been a kind of satellite state or even an important part of the Xiongnu empire with a predominantly Korean population who may perhaps have been the forefathers of the Goguryeo people. As a matter of fact, both the foundation and fall of Wiman Joseon were intimately tied to the destiny of the Xiongnu as we shall see later.

The Xiongnu persistently exerted pressure along the Chinese border for decades. However, the Han Chinese limited themselves to dealing with their foe by means of diplomacy, revealing their rather disconcerting military impotence (Chang, 1979; Jeong, 1960; Pak Cheol-gyu, 1998; Kang, 1998). The scenario was characterized as an authentic cultural clash between the "Chinese order" and the "Barbarians" (Fairbank, 1968; Ji, 1989). However, after Emperor Wu (141-87 BCE) aceeded to the throne, China's attitude toward the Xiongnu changed radically. Between 129 and 119 BCE, the Chinese armies launched an impressive series of attacks against the Xiongnu (*Han Shu*, 6, 55; *Zizhi Tongjian*, 18-21). The

Chinese often came out victorious and eventually obtained tributary payments from various peoples once subjugated by the Xiongnu (*Sanguozhi*, 30); still, the Xiongnu forces were far from annihilated. Here is another interesting record: according to Shiji and Han Shu, after 119 BCE, China could not continue its offensive policy toward the Xiongnu for two main reasons: a) a shortage of horses, which limited the Han dynasty's military power (it appears that in the course of the military campaign of 129-119, the Han lost about 80% of their horses); and b) the wars that the Han dynasty was forced to wage against other nations, including Joseon (Korea). Now, if the war against Korea was not the one of 109-108 BCE, which war was it? The suspicion is that Korea provided the Xiongnu with some assistance, and for this reason, was attacked by the Chinese Han. The events of 109-108 BCE strengthen this hypothesis. The Chinese Emperor Wu decided to launch a massive military campaign against the Xiongnu—an operation that is reported in Chinese sources as "the cutting off of the right arm." As a matter of fact, Emperor Wu and his officials understood that most of Xiongnu's power derived from the aid and supplies provided by the oases of the Central Asian deserts, which had always played a key role in the historical events involving China and its nomadic neighbors (Sobti, 2004; Pulleyblank, 2002). For this reason, between 109 and 108 BCE, the Chinese army attacked and conquered the oases of Turfan and Loulan (樓蘭) (*Shiji*, 123; *Han Shu*, 96). During the same time period, the Chinese Han also attacked and conquered Wiman Joseon. Was this pure coincidence or the result of a well-prepared plan of action? And, if so, can we say that the campaign against Wiman Joseon represented "the cutting off of the left arm" of the Xiongnu?

The Xiongnu empire began its slow decline in the 1st century BCE. In the meantime, Goguryeo was founded in the same period, and despite the ebbing of Xiongnu's power, Goguryeo very soon began to show loyalty toward the Xiongnu as demonstrated in the episode of 12 CE discussed earlier. In this respect, it is possible that Goguryeo simply

continued with the same policy of friendship as Wiman Joseon. We do not know why, but historical sources, including Chinese ones, show that Xiongnu and Goguryeo shared many cultural similarities. Is this also pure coincidence or is the link between the two peoples actually somewhat deeper than had once been thought?

Internal turmoil gradually led to the division of the Xiongnu empire into "Northern Xiongnu" and "Southern Xiongnu." Northern Xiongnu was defeated in 155 CE and its people were assimilated into the Xianbei (鮮卑), who in 286, destroyed the Buyeo kingdom.[6] This led to a massive wave of migration to the Korean peninsula. Northern Xiongnu went on to play a significant role in Chinese history in the 4th century, eventually forming the ethnic core of the Chinese statelets of Zhao (趙) and Liang (凉). After the 4th century, records about the Xiongnu become even rarer and sparser. Perhaps they reappeared as the Huns in Western history (Maenchen-Helfen, 1944-45), but this conjecture is not specifically relevant to my research. I will only touch upon certain questions related to this problematic identification, questions which have often been (dangerously) posed on the basis of the phonetic semblance between "Xiongnu" and "Hun." These questions are still being debated, with scholars being either *pro or contra* the identification of the Xiongnu with the Huns (Wright, 2001). Regardless, we can be certain of two points. First, Attila was undoubtedly of the Mongolian race. The descriptions of his appearance recorded by western historians of Late Antiquity, such as Priscus (C. 420-470) and Jordanes, leave us no room for doubt. Jordanes, in *Storia del Goti*, for example, wrote, "*Forma brevis, lato pectore, capite grandiori, minutis oculis, rarus barba, canis aspersus, simo naso, teter colore, originis suae signa restituens* (He was short of stature, with a broad chest, and a large head; his eyes were small, his beard thin, his

[6] The movements of the Xianbei played an important role in changing the political landscape of the Far East (Kim Yeong-hwan, 1988). Nevertheless, the relations between the Xianbei and the Xiongnu still remain unclear (Sin, 1999).

hair sprinkled with gray; he was snub-nosed and of hideous color, revealing the evidence of his origin).” The second point concerns an ancient letter, written by a Sogdian merchant, and found in 1907 by Sir Aurel Stein among the ruins of an old watchtower on the road between Dunhuang (敦煌) and Loulan (樓蘭). The letter, written in a Middle Iranian language, hints at some dramatic events affecting China at that time. One such event was the destruction of Luoyang (落陽). Since the city of Luoyang was destroyed on three separate occasions (in 190, in 311, and around 530-535 CE), it is not easy to date the letter, even if a slight preference is accorded by some scholars to the oldest date. However, whatever the date of the letter, the important thing is that the document refers to a direct intervention in Chinese matters by a people referred to as the “Xŵn” (Huns), which can almost certainly be identified with the Xiongnu, or at least with their southern branch (Daffinà, 1982, pp. 86-87). The identity of the people behind a mysterious name, at least in this case, seems to have been solved. Nevertheless, many other uncertainties have yet to be resolved.

III. Xiongnu and Koreans (Buyeo-Goguryeo): What was the nature of their relationship?

If we look at the Xiongnu and the ancient Koreans of Buyeo-Goguryeo, we can easily notice that their cultures share similar features. It goes without saying that the cultures of the Far East and those of Siberia cannot but share some similarities. It is also true that my study concentrates on similarities rather than differences. Nevertheless, some of the similarities between the Xiongnu and the ancient Koreans are so uncanny that they cannot fail to arouse the interest of researchers. I will discuss some of them here.

1. Houses and Tombs

The excavation of presumed Xiongnu sites and studies on Xiongnu artifacts are revealing more and more about the Xiongnu culture (Rudenko, 1969; Antonini, 1994; Erdèly, 1994), especially about Xiongnu burial customs (Erdy, 2001; *Monggol jiyeok*, 1995; *A Xiongn*u *cemetery*, 2002, p. 293). While not forgetting that the Xiongnu were essentially a nomadic people who usually lived in tents called "*jionglü*" (穹廬) (*Shiji*, 1975, p. 110; *Han Shu*, 94), one of the few villages surely attributable to the Xiongnu is located near Ulan Ude, east of Lake Baikal. It was excavated by Soviet archaeologists. The village has been dated to around the reign of Mo Du (end of the 3rd - early 2nd century BCE). The houses there have heating systems comprising pipes built into the walls. Such a heating system is, in certain respects, similar to the Korean ondol, which began to be used in Korea more or less around the same period. It also appears that the Xiongnu occasionally farmed (Rudenko, 1969, pp. 27-28) and kept various species of domesticated animals, some of which remain unidentified (Egami, 1951).

As for the burial system, the Xiongnu favored (at least for important people) the tumulus, which indeed was widely used in many Siberian cultures. Tumuli were almost unknown in Korea until the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period (although they seem to have been common in the ancient Buyeo kingdom). When they first began to be used on the Korean peninsula (e.g., early Goguryeo), the tumuli exhibited the typical Siberian (and Xiongnu) structure, which comprises a wooden coffin on a stone platform. Moreover, it is also a fact that the people of Goguryeo and Buyeo did not use jar coffins, a burial system unknown to the cultures of the steppes nor to the Xiongnu (Riotto, 1989; Riotto, 1995).

2.Whistling Arrows

The first reference to "whistling arrows" concerns the Xiongnu. They

seem to have been invented by the famous *shanyu* Mo Du with the purpose of getting many arrows to converge on the same target during a hunt or a battle (*Shiji*, 110; *Han Shu*, 94). Whistling arrows continued to be used for many centuries, and they were most certainly used in Goguryeo. As a matter of fact, the arrows depicted in the famous hunting scene[7] of the mural paintings of Muyongchong (舞踊塚, Tomb of Dancers) seem to be whistling arrows and are very similar to the ones excavated in eastern Siberia that are currently housed in the Institute for the Archaeological Research of Novosibirsk in Russia. Whistling arrowheads, which are called "*uneun sal*" (우는 살) or "*hyosi*" (嚆矢) in Korean "and "*mingdi*" (鳴鏑) or "*zhaojian*" (哨箭) in Chinese, have also been excavated in Korea, including the one found in Tomb no. 4 at Hwango-dong (皇吾洞), Gyeongju (*Hanguk munhwa*, 1994, p. 639).

3. Administration of Justice

In *Sanguozhi* (Records of Three Kingdoms), it is said that Goguryeo had customs similar to those of Buyeo (30). In particular, there is mention that Goguryeo had "no prisons" (無牢獄). This record coincides in some ways with what is reported in *Shiji* and *Han Shu* apropos the Xiongnu: "Their prison sentences never last more than ten days and actually very few people are imprisoned." The absence of prisons is quite natural among nomadic peoples such as the Xiongnu, but how does one explain the same phenomenon in Goguryeo? Perhaps the meaning of the Chinese record simply is that Goguryeo prisons were made of perishable material, but, if not, should we believe that (at least in the epoch to which the record refers) the Goguryeo people were still unable to forget their

[7] Hunting seems to have played a very important role in Goguryeo society. An echo of this is found in the famous episode regarding General Ondal (溫達) described in *Samguk Sagi* (三國史記), 45 (Riotto, 1996). Indeed, Goguryeo culture at large exhibits typically Central Asian cultural features (*Goguryeo munhwasa*, 1988; *Goguryeo-eui sasang*, 2005b; Yi Ok, 1990; Watson, 1998).

nomadic past?

4. Levirate

As is well known, the levirate was a characteristic custom of ancient Buyeo and Goguryeo. The levirate episode of King Gogukcheon (故國川王), as reported in *Samguk Sagi*, is very famous. The levirate custom was also practiced among the Xiongnu, as is clearly indicated in *Shiji* (110) and *Han Shu* (94). Regarding the practice of this particular custom in Buyeo, Sanguozhi leaves no room for doubt: "兄死妻嫂與匈奴同俗" (…*when a man dies, his younger brother marries the widow; and this custom is identical to that of the Xiongnu*…). I think this account is very important in that among the many peoples, the Chinese source mentioned only the Xiongnu in connection with Buyeo's levirate custom. If other ethnic groups practiced the levirate custom, there would have been mention of them in the same source or elsewhere.

5. Clans

According to Chinese sources, the Xiongnu were divided into four (or five) clans: the Luandi ( , Royal Clan), Huyan (呼衍), Qiulin (丘林), Lan (蘭), and Xubu (須卜). The Luandi clan gave rise to a figure named Tuqi (屠耆), whose status seems to have been second only to the shanyu (*Han Sh*u, 94; Hou *Han Shu*, 89). In recent times, more light has been shed on Xiongnu clans and their social ranks, thanks especially to the studies of Chinese scholars (Lin, 1986, pp. 11 ff.; Chen, 1999, pp. 237 ff.; Ma, 2005, pp. 397-411; Wang, 2004, pp. 132 ff.). As is well known, Goguryeo was also originally divided into five clans: the Yeonno (涓奴), Gyeru (桂婁), Gwanno (灌奴), Jeollo (絶奴), and Sunno (順奴). What is very interesting in this respect is that the character "*no*" of the Goguryeo clan names is identical to the second character of the word "Xiongnu" (whose Korean pronunciation is "Hyungno"). The character "*no*" (奴)

means "slave." Independent of any possible variations in the pronunciation of the character, it is quite obvious that the character's ideographic meaning was used in addition to its sound. Was it used, then, by the Chinese, in order to deprecate Goguryeo (without any association with the Xiongnu), or is it another hint to a shared identity between the peoples of Goguryeo and Xiongnu? Yeonno is said to have once been the ruling clan but then "…lost its power." Why? Was it toppled and replaced in a moment of crisis? The hypotheses founded on linguistic resemblance are the most hazardous, partly due to the fact that the ancient pronunciation of Chinese and Korean is still anything but completely clear, and we only know Xiongnu terms by their Chinese transposition. Nevertheless, what if "Huyan," "Qiulin," and "Yeonno" are phonetic deformations, respectively, of "Buyeo", "Jeollo" and "Xiongnu"? This question may never be answered, but the idea of a shared identity between the Xiongnu, Buyeo, and Goguryeo is surely enticing.

6. Government Ranks

Xiongnu government officiaks were divided into twelve ranks, with each rank being subdivided into the "right" and "left." We are told that in Goguryeo, too, there were twelve ranks, as reported in *Xin Tang Shu* and *Sui Shu*. It must be noted, however, that thirteen ranks are listed in *Zhou Shu* and ten ranks in *Sanguozhi*.

7. "White Horse Oath"

In 42 BCE, the Xiongnu *shanyu* Hu Han Xie (呼韓邪) and Chinese ambassadors Han Chang (韓昌) and Zhang Meng (張猛) entered into an alliance. The alliance was solemnized by a "white horse oath." The skin of a white horse was scratched until blood spurted forth. The blood was poured into a cup. On that occasion, the "cup" was the skull of the king of the Yuechi who had been killed in battle by the *shany*u Lao Shang

(老上) (r. 174-160 BCE). It was then drunk by all the contracting parties (*Han Shu*, 94; Průšek, 1971, p. 132). In Korea, the "white horse oath" is mentioned in the novel *The Tale of Hong Gildong* (洪吉童傳), written in the early 17th century (Riotto, 2005, p. 28), indicating just how common such oaths were. Koreans seem to have used regular cups, rather than the skulls of slain enemies, but there is very little more we know about that ritual as it was practiced by Koreans in the ancient epoch. We do know, however, that the practice of drinking out of the enemy's skull was quite diffused in Central Asia and also spread among Germanic peoples, including the Longobards: "*…in eo proelio Alboin Cunimundum occidit, caputque illius sublatum, ad bibendum ex eo poculum fecit...* (...in that battle, Alboin killed King Gunmund, and after beheading him, Alboin turned King Gunmund's skull into a cup to drink from...)" (Paulus Diaconus, I, 27).

8. Tängri = Dangun?

The Xiongnu word for "sky," according to Chinese sources, was "chengli," which is anything but the term "tanri" or "tangri"—used in the sense of the heaven or god—found in the modern Turkic vocabulary. This does not mean that the Xiongnu spoke a Turkic language: on the contrary, it is more probable that "tängri" is a pure Xiongnu word that was later adopted by the Turks. Another plausible hypothesis is that "tängri" and Dangun (檀君, Korean sky god, grandson of the lord of heaven) are related terms sharing the same root. It was originally suggested by the famous Korean scholar and writer Choe Nam-seon (崔南善) (1890-1957) and the idea has been revisited in more recent studies (Jeon, 2006).

9. "Parthian Shot"

One of the most famous murals in the aforementioned Muyongchong

(舞踊塚, Tomb of the Dancers), which dates to the 5th century, depicts a hunting scene. The mural is in just about every publication on Goguryeo art (Choe & Im, 1992; *Goguryeo*, *Balhae munhwa,* 1985). Some of the hunters portrayed in the fresco are in a stylized pose, which art historians refer to as the "Parthian's arrow" or the "Parthian shot." This artistic motif represents a mounted archer riding in the "flying gallop" (none of the horse's legs are touching the ground), with his torso turned to the side to fire an arrow. This particular theme is common to Central Asian art, represented since ancient times in what is commonly referred to as Scytho-Siberian art. Its presence in the tombs of Goguryeo shows that, at the very least, Goguryeo artists were acquainted with Central Asian cultures, (acquired perhaps through the Xiongnu?). Also, while the frescoes of Goguryeo tombs were painted somewhat later—starting in the 4th century CE, Goguryeo artists may have first become familiar with the art of the steppes before then.

10. Legend of Kim Il-je

A very interesting albeit not very well-known legend concerning ancient Korea involves a man by the name of Kim Il-je (, Jin Ridi) (134-86 BCE). If we trust Chinese sources (Han Shu, 68; *Zizhi Tongjian*, 19-23), we can also assume that he was a real historical figure and that his story is relevant to this research.

Kim was a Xiongnu prince, who, along with his family, was captured by the Han for refusing to betray his people. He became a public slave and was put in charge of handling and caring for imperial horses. As time passed, his skills, fair looks, and honesty impressed Emperor Wu, who decided to give him a family name. Since the Xiongnu used to make sacrifices to a sacred statue made of gold (or metal), the chosen family name was "Jin" (or "Kim" in Korean), meaning "gold" or "metal". In terms of Xiongnu religion, there are no doubts about its shamanistic nature (Pak Won-gil, 1998). As a side note, the statue was

sezied by the Chinese in 122 or 121 BCE (*Shiji*, 110-111; *Han Sh*u, 55, 94; Zürcher, 1959, p. 21; Hulsewé, 1979, p. 75). Kim Il-je had the opportunity to repay the favor by saving Emperor Wu from an assassination attempt by a certain Ma Heluo (馬何羅) in 88 BCE, but soon after this dramatic event, the already aged Emperor Wu passed away. About a year later, the new Emperor Zhao (昭) gave Kim Il-je the title "*hu*" (侯, marquis). However, Kim died just a day later. It is interesting to note that the funerary stele of King Munmu (文武王) (r. 661-681) of Silla seems to recognize the king himself as a descendant of Kim Il-je. In the sentence "…侯祭天之胤傳七葉…," the "*hu*" (marquis) of the first character is clearly a direct reference to the title of the Xiongnu prince. Kim Il-je's descendants enjoyed imperial favor during the remainder of the Former Han (or Western Han) period and even under Wang Mang's rule.[8] However, events took a turn for the worse for the Kim household in the beginning of Later Han[9] (Eastern Han); in 25 CE, the descendants of the Xiongnu prince were forced to flee to Korea. At this point, history becomes legend as it is reported in the *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事): in the year 65, King Talhae (脫解王) (r. 57-80) of Silla adopted the young Kim Al-ji (金閼智) (a descendant of Kim Il-je) and eventually named Kim his successor. Kim Al-ji declined the throne, but seven generations later, one of his direct descendants ascended to the throne of Silla: King Michu (味鄒王) (better known as Michu isageum (味鄒 尼師今); r. 261-284). He became the first Silla king from the Kim family, and in particular, from the famous clan known as the Kim of Gyeongju (慶州).

Whatever the truth may be, the events regarding Kim Il-je and his

[8] I will not go so far as to claim (as does Yi Jong-ho, 2003, p. 170) that Wang Mang himself was a descendant of Kim Il-je, even if Wang probably did have an affair with a woman from the Kim family

[9] Perhaps this event is to be considered within the context of the characteristic traits of the Later Han empire (Bielenstein, 1954-1959) and their influence on Chinese-Xiongnu relations (Yi Ju, 1960).

descendants is yet another exemplification of the linkage between the Xiongnu and the Korean peninsula in an epoch that had been crucial to Korea's destiny. Even though it is difficult to extrapolate veritable historical records from the sea of sources, there is no doubt that a core element of truth does lie in them. We can easily assume that Silla still did not exist as a national entity in the 1st century, since the traditional date of foundation (57 BCE) is unacceptable; both Baekje and Silla clearly emerged as "states" during the 4th century. However, Goguryeo did exist in the 1st century. If Kim Il-je's descendants really did reach Korea, it is more likely that they reached Goguryeo, not Silla, even if legend tells it otherwise.

IV. Provisional Conclusions: What if the ancient Koreans (Buyeo and Goguryeo) were themselves a branch of the Xiongnu people? Better still: what if the Xiongnu were originally a branch of the ancient Korean people?

It appears that from early on, Goguryeo was a state with a distinct cultural identity that was very much Korean. Nevertheless, we know little to nothing about its origins. Goguryeo is surely linked both to Buyeo and Wiman Joseon; Goguryeo may represent the continuation of Wiman Joseon in a cultural sense wherein it was still in transition between tribalism and the early state, and that in spite of the four military commanderies (whose locations have never been identified for certain) established by the Chinese in the territory of Wiman Joseon after the war of 109-108 BCE. The role and location of the Chinese commanderies is still debated, particularly in view of the scarcity of archaeological evidence, and above all, in the absence of written records, such as steles and other documentation one might expect to find in the area where they were hypothetically located. Scripture was not taken up on the Korean peninsula until relatively late; however, the presence of the Chinese

should have resulted, theoretically speaking, in the faster adoption of writing. My study centers on the linkage between the Xiongnu and ancient Koreans (including those of Goguryeo) and conjectures that the linkage derives from the common origin of the two peoples. It must be reiterated that this is merely a suggestive hypothesis and does not claim to be anything more: there is still no decisive proof that can back up my hypothesis. In finding supporting evidence, the main obstacle lies in the fact that most of the sources dealing with the early Korean people do not deal with their very beginnings; the sources generally cover the time period in which ancient Koreans had already lost some of their primitive cultural characteristics.

Regarding the Xiongnu, the problem is similar, and in spite of the many references to them in Chinese historical sources, we know very little about them. The Xiongnu were probably a part of a federation of tribes, which through conquests, assimilated other peoples until the federation gradually came to form a more or less unified identity from an ethnic and linguistic point of view. We cannot rule out the possibility that under the generic name "Xiongnu," there were various tribes and ethnic groups—from Proto-Turks to Koreans—that occasionally found themselves serving a single chief. According to a brilliant definition proposed by J. Roux, "A Turk is anyone who speaks a Turkish language" (Roux, 1988, p. 17), regardless of physical appearance and specific tribal affiliation. Perhaps, a similar line of thinking could be applied in defining the Xiongnu. With reference to their origins, the myths that Chinese sources attribute to them are controversial. On the one hand, the Xiongnu seem to share with the Tujue (突厥, Turks) a totemic descent from a divine wolf. On the other hand, their main ancestor is said to have been the Chinese Chun Wei (淳維), a descendant of the wise King Yu (禹) of Xia (夏) (*Zhou Shu*, 50; *Wei Shu*, 102-103). Of note is that the figure Chun Wei can be easily identified with Gija (箕子) of Korean sources. For now, what we can say, based on ample sources, is that at least in the early stages, the Xiongnu and ancient Koreans shared similar cultural

features. Were they two faces of the same ethnic group? I don't know yet, but I am simply enchanted by the idea that a people speaking a proto-Korean language could have reached the doors of Europe, founding the largest known dominion before that of Genghis Khan. It is also mesmerizing to imagine the sounds of a proto-Korean language being heard and spoken as far away as the natural border between Europe and Asia, perhaps even at the core of Europe herself. Several years ago a Korean friend of mine, half jokingly and half seriously, told me that "Adalla" (阿達羅王), better known as Adalla Isageum (阿達羅 尼師今) (r. 154-184), the king of Silla, and "Attila," the chief of the Huns, are one and the same name. What more can I say?

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