Ethnohistory is a branch of anthropology that analyzes the origin, distribution, and distinguishing characteristics of the races (pertaining to the speech or culture groups), especially in regard to the development of cultures, through the analysis of archeological findings. Ethnohistory tends to respond to the current political environment in East Asia as elsewhere, imposing obvious and subtle constraints on the ways ethnohistory is pursued.

Definite evidence of millet (dated c. 5000 BC) is found at Xin-le sites (including the region around Shenyang and sites to the north) of Liao-dong. See Nelson (1993: 108).


In Asia, dolmen is found from India to Manchuria, but the highest density (exceeding 100,000 units) is found in Korea proper. According to Nelson, the number of dolmen in Korea suggests their indigenous origin as well as the possibility that the Ye-maek ruling

The Ancient Yan and the Ye-maek Chosun

THE XIANBEI-DONGHU AND THE YE-MAEK TUNGUS

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THE PROTO-XIANBEI-TUNGUS IN MANCHURIA

The proto-Turko-Mongol populations, who had first settled around Transbaikalia across the Great Altai, dispersed further across the Greater Xing’an Range to become the proto-Xianbei-Tungus in Manchuria, and an offshoot of them tracked a warmer and moister climate down through the Korean peninsula to become the rice-cultivating farmers. The Korean peninsula is an extension of central Manchuria towards the sea, having a long strip of plains in the west flanked by high mountains in the east.

The greater Manchurian ethnohistorical sphere of the Xianbei-Tungus that includes the Korean peninsula has formed one of the three major sub-regions of East Asia, sharing intimate histories with strong cultural affinity. The proto-Altaic speech community of Xianbei-Tungus had shared the Neolithic Hong-shan culture, and also the tradition of dolmens, broad-and-narrow-bladed bronze daggers, and Chulmun-Mumun pottery. The Korean peninsula has been closely connected with Manchuria not only as an ethnohistorical entity but also as a physical reality.

The Liao-xi steppe in western Manchuria was the home of Dong-hu, including the Xianbei and their descendent Qidan tribes, who were the steppe wolves leading a life rather like that of Mongolic nomads. The forest region in eastern
Manchuria, extending from the Lesser Xing’an Ranges down to the Changbai Mountain area, was the home of the Moho-Ruzhen Tungus (who were the descendants of Sushen-Yilou and ancestors of the core Manchu tribes) who were the forest tigers leading a life of rather extensive hunting and gathering supplemented by patchy farming.

The central Manchurian plain around the upper Songhua and Liao River basins (the Dong-bei Plain) as well as the mountainous areas around Hun (Dong-jia), Yalu and Tae-dong rivers were the home of the Ye-maek Tungus, including the people of Old Chosun, Puyeo, and Koguryeo, whose life involved millet farming and livestock breeding, with hunting and river fishing serving as additional means of subsistence.

The southern Korean peninsula was the home of rice-cultivating Ye-maek cousins who had established ancient political entities that were called collectively Chin, Han or Three Hans in the Chinese dynastic chronicles. In the ethnohistorical context, the ancient home of the Ye-maek Tungus, i.e., the central Manchurian basin and the Korean peninsula, may be defined as the “Korea proper.”

INCISED-PLAIN POTTERY, BRONZE DAGGERS AND DOLMEN

The Neolithic period of Korea proper, characterized by the comb-patterned Chul-mun pottery, began c. 8000 BC. According to Barnes (1993: 109), “the Fuhe, Hong-shan and Xin-le shared a textured-pottery tradition more similar to the incised Chul-mun of the Korean peninsula than the Neolithic cultures of the China Mainland.” A new pottery style represented by the plain Mumun pottery began to appear in Korea proper c. 2000 BC, designating the late Neolithic. Pottery from many sites of Liao-ning and Heilong-jiang is similar to the plain Mumun pottery from other Manchurian sites and the Korean peninsula.

Similarities between the Manchurian basin and the Korean peninsula, observed in the Neolithic sites in the form of comb-patterned Chul-mun pottery, continue in the Bronze Age sites in the form of plain Mumun pottery, dolmen, and bronze daggers. Dolmen, the status symbol of Ye-maek ruling elites, characterizes the Dong-yi culture of the Manchurian basin and the Korean peninsula. The dolmen sites never yield elites tried “to mark their territory by means of their burial places, as occurred in the British Isles.” See Nelson (1993: 159, 163). The northern-type dolmen, emerged in the late Chul-mun period, has huge slabs and capstone (weighing up to 300 tons), forming a cist-like chamber above ground, while the southern-type dolmen, emerged in the late Bronze Age, has a large capstone resting on several smaller stones at ground level with the burial in a stone cist or jar coffin in the ground underneath. Necklaces of tubular beads as well as comma-shaped beads appear in burials. According to Nelson (1995: 16), dolmens in the Manchurian plain and Liao-dong peninsula reveal “close connections with those in the Korean peninsula in contents as well as construction.” Xu Yu-lin (Nelson, 1995: 80) contends that “the Liao-dong, Shan-dong, and Korean peninsulas have influences and close relationships among them in the Neolithic.” The Dong-yi, who built dolmens around the Shan-dong peninsular region, were either absorbed or pushed into the Manchurian basin by the Han Chinese.

6 See Kim (1986: 121).

史記 卷三十四 燕召公世家
第 四 周武王之滅商 封召公於
北燕 宋忠曰 有南燕 故云北燕

其在成王時 召公為三公 自陝
以西 封召公之 自陝以東 周公
主之 陝者 蓋今弘農陝縣是也 …
孝王二十七年 燕見秦且滅六國
…燕王亡徙居遼東 …秦拔遼東
…太史公曰 … 燕迫蠻 薤內措
齊晉 崙莽彊國之間 最為弱小

史記 卷三十八 宋微子世家第
八 箕子者 紂親戚也…周武王
伐紂克殷…訪問箕子…封箕子
於朝鮮 而不臣也
史記 卷四 周本紀 第四 武王
… 命召公釋箕子之囚

1. Location of the so-called
“Long Wall built by Yan”
(Di Cosmo, 2002, p. 141)
13. Fu-xin; and 14. Karachin Banner

iron, so dolmen-building is thought to have been discontinued
by 300 BC (see Barnes, 1993, p. 166).

The Bronze Age began c. 1500 BC in the Manchurian
basin and c. 1000 BC in the Korean peninsula (see Barnes,
Bronze Age per se is defined by the intrusion of the [broad-
bladed] Liao-ning dagger from the Manchurian Basin.” Unlike
the Han Chinese bronze daggers, the blade of Liao-ning
daggers was cast separately from the hilt. According to Nelson
(1993: 133), “Liao-ning dagger is found abundantly in the Liao-
dong peninsula and around Bohai Bay, as well as in Korea, but
it is not found in China south of the Great Wall.” Molds for
bronzes daggers, arrowheads, (fine-lined) mirrors, fishhooks,
and axes, and other bronze artifacts such as bells, (animal-
shaped) belt buckles, buttons, horse trappings, and chariot
ornaments have appeared in the plain Maman pottery sites
throughout the peninsula. The origins of the bronze dagger
and the fine-lined mirror that are abundantly found in the
Korean peninsula are traced to the Upper Xiajia-dian culture of
1100-300 BC (see Pai, 2000, pp. 200, 203).

Rice discovered in the western peninsula dates from
2400 and 2100 BC (see Nelson, 1993, p. 147). A group of
southern Chinese who were cultivating rice perhaps crossed the
Yellow Sea and found a similar ecological niche in the southern
peninsula. By taking advantage of northeasterly winds, ships
could sail in summer directly from the mouth of Yang-zi River
toward the southwestern tip of the Korean peninsula.

YAN AND THE SO-CALLED YAN LONG WALL

According to the Shi-ji, King Wu (r. 1049-43 BC) of
Western Zhou enfeoffed his half-brother, Shao-gong, as the
ruler of (Northern) Yan, and also enfeoffed Kija (Ji-zi, a
relative of the last king of Shang) as the ruler of Chosun, an
eastern neighbor of Yan. With a few strokes, Si-ma Qian
installed two ancient Han Chinese royal scions as founders of
the states located in the traditional domain of both the Dong-
hu and Ye-maek Tungus. The Shi-ji states that, during the reign
of King Cheng (1042-1006 BC), the Lord of Zhou (regent.
1042-36 BC) ruled the east of Shaan, and the Duke of Shao
the west of Shaan. Shi-ji notes that there must have been
another Yan (called Southern Yan) that did not belong to the territory enfeoffed to Shao-gong.7

Chosun appears in the records on the ruler of Qi (685-43 BC) in the Guan-zi that was compiled during the Warring States Period.8 Puyeo and Chosun both appear in the Shi-ji records on (Old) Yan in the fourth century BC. The History of Later Han records that the area of Ye, Ok-jeo and Koguryeo originally belonged to the territory of Chosun.9

The Zhou court fell into complete decay and the Warring States period began in 403 BC. According to the Wei-Lüe (quoted in the Three Han section of Dongyi-zhuan), when the Zhou became weak, the ruler of Yan assumed the title of king [in 323 BC]; then the “Lord of Chosun, a scion of Ji-zi (Kija)” also declared himself king; and these two states were on the brink of fighting each other. The armed conflicts between Chosun and Yan at last occurred c. 300 BC: the Yan dispatched a general named Qin Kai (who was active during 311-297 BC) to invade Chosun. The Wei-Lüe was compiled between 280 and 289 AD by Yu Huan, and about 40 percent of Dongyi-zhuan consists of quotations from the Wei-Lüe.

According to the Xiong-nu section of Shi-ji, the general named Qin Kai had been taken as hostage to the Dong-hu, enjoyed the fullest confidence of them, but after returning to Yan, staged a surprise attack on the Dong-hu in 311 BC, just 90 years prior to Yan’s downfall in 222 BC, making the Dong-hu to retreat about a thousand li. The Shi-ji then notes that the Yan had established five provinces, including the Liao-xi and Liao-dong provinces, and constructed a Long Wall from Zao-yang to Xiang-ping.10

According to the Shi-ji, the walls built by the Yan and rebuilt by the Qin reached Laio-dong. As shown in the twelfth century map of Di Li Tu, however, the present-day Luan River was called the Liao River in old days, and the present-day Liao River was called the Lesser Liao River. Hence the “Liao-dong” in the Shi-ji must have implied the east of Luan River.11 That is, the Liao-xi and Liao-dong provinces established by the Yan must have been located around the modern-day Luan River, while the provinces of Shang-gu, Yu-yang, and Youbei-ping were located in northern Hebei.

Remains of a line of fortifications (built with stamped
The state of Yan is said to have been blocked by Jie-shi Mountain. The Jie-shi Mountain is located in Chang-li prefecture to the east of the lower Luan River.

The excavation of a large number of bronze objects, such as knives with ringed handles, horse- and bird-motif ornaments, bell ornaments, buttons, earrings, and belt hooks places this area in a cultural context that is fully outside the Central Plain sphere.

The wall was not built to separate nomad and farmer, but to establish a strong military presence to control the movement of people. The wall was mostly defending the non-agricultural territory. There is no evidence to support that the wall was protecting the Han Chinese settlements in areas traditionally inhabited by alien peoples engaged mainly in pastoral activities. We still do not know the precise function of the wall, and what it was actually defending.

The only basis of attributing this line of fortifications running from Karachin Banner to the Fu-xin to the work of the Yan (dating to no later than 299 BC) rests solely on the “Long Wall” mentioned in the Shi-zhi.
Han section of Dongyi-zhuan records that the king of Chosun who was thrown out by Wei-Man fled south to the [Three] Han (old Chin) area and called himself the King of Han.13

According to the Shi-ji, the ancient Yan was the smallest and the weakest among the seven warring states, and it was during the reign of King Zhao (昭 311-279 BC) that the Yan had supposedly expanded its territory greatly toward northeast. And yet King Zhao somehow decided, supposedly at the peak of Yan’s military might, to remove his court to Wuyang 武陽 near Yixian 易縣 that was located in southwest of the old capital Jicheng 藥城. A host of questions may arise in one’s mind, such as: (1) Had the (Northern) Yan’s territory ever extended beyond the present-day Hebei province?; (2) Did the so-called “Yan Long Wall” have anything to do with the Han Chinese Yan?; (3) Wasn’t the “Long Wall” mentioned in the Shi-ji located at the exactly identical places where Qin Shi-huang-di later constructed the “Great Wall,” serving as its ready-made base?; (4) Wasn’t there a Dong-hu (Southern) Yan domain together with the Han Chinese (Northern) Yan?; (5) Who had been occupying the Liao-xi area around the Luan River prior to the Qin Kai’s exploits in 311 BC?; (6) Who did occupy the the Daling-he basin of the modern-day Liao-ning province after the Qin Kai’s exploits?; and (7) How could a “Yan” person named Wei-Man appear sometime in 206-195 BC wearing Dong-hu clothes complete with a topknot?14

THE XIANBEI-DONGHU AND THE YE-MAEK TUNGUS

On the mainland China, both “low-carbon” wrought iron and “high-carbon” cast iron were present from 500 BC onwards, and “medium-carbon” steel was common after 300 BC. It is believed that the iron culture of China, in the form of iron weapons, horse trappings, bits, axe caps, hoes, plowshares, and sickles, was transmitted to Korea through Old Yan c. 400 BC.15 Artifacts found together with iron implements in Korea proper include the finely wrought bronze daggers (slender stabbing swords, the blade still being cast separately from the hilt) and the Scytho-Siberian style animal-shaped belt buckles.

The conflicts between Old Chosun and Old Yan that were formally recorded in the Chinese dynastic chronicles suggest a fairly intimate relationship (in the form of incessant

14 According to Guo (1995b: 178), burials of Lower Xiajia-dian culture were found at Liuli-he in Beijing at levels earlier than the Shang dynasty, beneath the level of the Early Western Zhou in what became the capital of the Shao-gong’s Yan State. The character for Yan had already existed in inscriptions on oracle bones. Sima Qian (c. 145-86 BC) wrote that King Wu enfeoffed Shao-gong as the ruler of Northern Yan. Shi-ji gives a note saying that there must be some other Yan, such as the Southern Yan. During a hundred year period of 336-436, there appeared four Yan states, namely, the Former Yan (337-70), the Later Yan (384-408), the Western Yan (384-94), the Southern Yan (398-410), and the Northern Yan (409-36). Surprisingly, the rulers of the Northern Yan, that was located in the Liao-xi area, were Han Chinese, while the rulers of all other Yan states including the Southern Yan that was located in the Shan-dong peninsula, were all the Murong Xianbei.

15 See Barnes (1993: 150). Yu Ying-shih (Twitchet and Loewe, 1986: 447) states: “active commercial contacts were taking some of the inhabitants of Yan to Korea, where they left large quantities of coin cast in Yan’s mints.”
See Barnes (2001: 83-4). Nelson (1993: 174) notes that: “Iron artifacts were produced in small furnaces which have been found along the North Han River, dating to the third century BC or earlier. These sites are all near sources of iron.” From the old Kaya sites on the southern Korean coast, primitive iron-working furnaces have been found and dated to 1st and 2nd centuries BC.

Old Chosun had so grown in strength and domain as to interrupt, in the second century BC, the contact between the Former Han dynasty and the petty walled town states of Chin (the later period Three-Han) located south of the Han River in the Korean peninsula (see Lee, 1984, p. 17). In early 109 BC, the King of Chosun invaded Liao-dong [located in east of the Luan River] and killed a Han Chinese officer. Being seriously concerned about the possible alliance with the Xiong-nu, Han Wu-di (141-87 BC) launched an attack on Chosun in autumn. The King of Chosun was killed in summer of 108 BC, and Wu-di established four commanderies, thus “severing the left arm of the Xiong-nu.” Within three decades, however, only the Le-lang Commandery in the Tae-dong River basin remained (until about 313 AD, together with the Dai-fang Commandery that was established by the Gong-sun rulers some time between 204 and 220).

BC 108 represents the historical date of the Han Chinese debouchment into the lower basin of the Liao River and the northwestern coast of the Korean peninsula for the first time in East Asian history. After the fall of the Western Jin in 316 AD, the Han Chinese settlers who became isolated in the Liao River basin blended alternately with the Xianbei and the Tungus as advantage dictated. The formal Han Chinese rule of the Liao-dong area was repeated 352 years later during 668-755 under the Tang dynasty. Most of the time, however, the Liao-dong had been a land contested among the Xianbei-Qidan and Yemaek-Ruzhen Tungus peoples.