

History wars

Whose stele is it?



Imaginechina

Koguryo's bones of contention

PUSHING up through the late-winter snows on a hill above Manchuria's Tumen river are scatterings of old burial mounds. For centuries these tombs and others like them attracted little attention. Now they are at the heart of a bitter international tussle that has, for once, united North and South Korea against China.

The tombs are the work of the Koguryo kingdom (Gaogouli in Chinese) that flourished between 37BC and 668AD. At its height, Koguryo territory stretched all the way from central Manchuria (north-east China) to south of present-day Seoul. At Koguryo's former capital, near Ji'an in China's Jilin province, a magnificent stele praises the deeds of a fifth-century king.

For every Korean schoolchild, Koguryo was one of Korea's three founding kingdoms. At the heart of the kingdom, Mount Paektu, which today spans the Chinese border with North Korea, is considered to be the fount of Korean culture and myth: indeed, Kim Jong Il's official biography insists that the North Korean leader was born on its slopes.

Even a short stay in South Korea impresses on the visitor that the matter of Korea's bloodlines is not to be messed with. Yet in 2002 Beijing's Centre for the Study of Borderland History and Geography launched a project that reinforces what a growing number of Chinese historians have been "scientifically" insisting, despite sparse archaeological evidence: that the Koguryo kingdom shared its lineage and culture with the Chinese, and was eventually absorbed into the Chinese body politic. Koguryo, in short, was not Korean but Chinese.

South Korean historians have taken to the streets, demonstrating against Chinese ones. South and North Korea tried to block Chinese attempts to have Koguryo monuments (as well as Mount Paektu) listed by UNESCO as a world heritage site. The South Korean government has challenged the legitimacy of the 1909 Kando convention in which imperial Japan, which had just annexed Korea, gave China a chunk of Korean Manchuria in return for concessions. This year, at the winter Asian games in north-east China, South Korean skaters held up signs which read: "Mount Paektu is our territory." China wants to hold the 2018 winter Olympic games on its slopes.

In February the South Korean government said it planned to revise high-school books to trace Korea's ancient history back by 1,000 years more than hitherto. The Kojoson kingdom, the new books say, began in 2333BC, deftly outmanoeuvring China's claims on the younger Koguryo, which covers much of the same territory. Never mind the spurious precision of the date, or the statement that "Kojoson was established by Tangun," a mythical demi-god.

China's version of the past has everything to do with its present territory and borders. In Japan Focus, an online journal, Yonson Ahn of the University of Leipzig calls it China's "territorialisation of history". But why should it suddenly matter so much now, in this bleak corner of the country?

For the answer, look to North Korea. Should the regime of Kim Jong Il collapse and the two Koreas be unified, then China's own 2.2m ethnic Koreans might agitate to come into the fold—and other supposedly happy “minority nationalities”, such as Tibetans and Uighurs, might also get fidgety.

When your correspondent asked his ethnic Korean guide to the tombs which country he loved, the answer was quick and unequivocal: “China, of course! That is where I was born.” When asked which country his home town should be in if the peninsula were ever to be united, the answer was equally firm: Korea.

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