

The periodization of Korean archaeology in the context of reimagining a collective ancient past

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The Korean peninsula was colonized by the Japanese Empire, leaving a large shadow over Koreans. In addition, the decolonization of the peninsula happened in the rarified environment of the incipient Cold War, resulting in the division of Koreans in two political entities. These two aspects have joined to define in a great degree the postcolonial reality of South Korea, where the questions of how to consider and measure the colonial legacy have clear implications even for current political affairs. As an example, debates about collaborationism or the inclusion/exclusion of colonial buildings as part of national heritage have been quite alive all the way up to 21st century.

Many of these debates have been fueled by the idea that colonialism was not just a political period, but also a system that imposed cultural and intellectual categories that would reinforce such colonial control. From that perspective, the continuation of colonial categories would be an important aspect in the decolonization, and for the coining of the term 'postcolonial'. One of the academic disciplines involved in the configuration of such system was archaeology. Korean archaeology started under the colonial period, being instrumental in the articulation of justification for the colonial rule over the peninsula. Thus, one of the tasks of Korean intellectuals after the Liberation focused on the decolonization of such discipline.

This lecture will look at the attempts at decolonizing Korean archaeology in South Korea after 1945 focusing on the periodization of Korean archaeology. In order to do so, the lecture will compare two models developed during the colonial and postcolonial period, focusing on the continuities and discontinuities between them.

Perspectives on the history of Korean archaeology

The colonial period has left a very complex legacy to all former colonies around the world, including Korea. The debates about how to understand and evaluate such legacy in South Korea still are not settled yet, partly due to the extension of the legacy, partly on the shifting positions from which such legacy is evaluated. Thus, the question about the extent and limit of the decolonization of South Korean society is still an open debate worthy of attention.

Part of that colonial legacy affects directly the organization and production of academic discourses that tries to explain the origins of Korean culture. Such continuity is particularly negative because it could mean the continuities of the colonial discourse of domination over Korean society into nowadays understandings of Korean culture. Disciplines such as ancient Korean history or Korean archaeology trace their origins to

the early efforts of Japanese scholars to understand the early introductions of culture in the peninsula. Understanding the extension of the colonial influence in the later organization of academic disciplines after Liberation of South Korea and the attempts of Korean scholars to challenge such legacy is an important step to understand how colonial ideas still frame our understanding of Korean archaeology. Thus, the understanding of the degree in which current Korea archaeology is still influenced by the colonial discourse of domination is an important debate.

This paper will consider the extension of continuity and the active attempts at decolonizing the periodization of Korean archaeology. Periodization in archaeology, as in other historical disciplines, is a fundamental tool to organize and structure a discourse about cultural change, but it also conveys a particular political position regarding the periodized object, in as much as it establishes the key to organize the periods and define the turning points.¹ As such, the periodization projects of Korean archaeology from colonial and postcolonial times can represent an important device for the analysis of the continuity and discontinuity of colonial discourse of domination over Korean people, and the attempts of Korean archaeologists at decolonizing such discourse.

The history of Korean archaeology has considered the problem of decolonization from two main positions. On the one hand, some historians of Korean archaeology looked at the decolonization process from a nationalistic perspective, assuming Japanese archaeologists had a political agenda for their research, but freeing postcolonial archaeologists of a political agenda in their evaluations.² Thus, Korean archaeology would become free from the colonial influence once Korean archaeologists started researching and publishing their own original ideas. On the other hand, there are also historians of Korean archaeology that point out a strong dependency of postcolonial Korean archaeology such as the essentialist understanding of cultures as races with essential qualities.³ Thus, they argue that in key aspects, Korean archaeology would promote a continuation of the racial aspects of colonial archaeology, but flipping the superior race. These two visions on Korean archaeology present problems, because either do not consider the continuity of a colonial legacy in the practice of archaeological research, or because they stress it too much and deny the autonomy of Korean scholars to decolonize their own practice. By looking at the changes in the periodization projects between the colonial and postcolonial periods, it is possible to evaluate the success and limits in the decolonization of Korean archaeology. Furthermore, it is also important to consider the new international and cultural alliances that South Korea developed since 1945, as they also affected the postcolonial Korean archaeology and the decolonization process.

¹ Fred M. Donner, «Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History», *Der Islam* 91, n.º 1 (1 de enero de 2014): 20-36.

² Kim Wönyong, «Korean Archaeology Today», *Korea Journal* 21, n.º 9 (1981): 22-43; Ch'oe Mongryong et al., *Han'guk Sönsa Kogohaksa* (Seoul: Dosöch'ulp'an Kkach'i, 1992).

³ Sarah M. Nelson, «The Politics of Ethnicity in Prehistoric Korea», in *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 218-31; Pai Hyung Il, *Constructing «Korean» origins: a critical review of archaeology, historiography, and racial myth in Korean state-formation theories* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000); Pai Hyung Il, *Heritage Management in Korea and Japan: The Politics of Antiquity and Identity*, Korean Studies of the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

This evaluation of Korean archaeology periodization projects will be based on the comparison of two representative periodization projects, one from the colonial period and another from the postcolonial period. The colonial period is represented by the periodization project suggested by Fujita Ryōsaku in the end of the colonial period. His model was highly influential as it was one of the first models constructed for Korean archaeology. The postcolonial period is represented by the periodization project suggested by Kim Wōnyong, founding father of postcolonial Korean archaeology. Kim's model is with some changes still in use in Korean archaeology, highlighting its relevance for the present article.

The Colonial experience, its legacy and archaeology

The colonial period was a complex period full of violence and dramatic changes for Korean society. Despite the official date of the protectorate over the Korean peninsula is 1905, Japanese interest on its colonization goes back in time to the late 19th century, the security concerns of the Meiji oligarchy and the growing economic interest of Japanese merchants in Korea.⁴ Equally, the first Japanese archaeologist and anthropologists that traveled to Korea arrived before the protectorate in 1900, such as Yagi Sōzaburō.

The colonial state organized as part of its legitimization discourse a rather important archaeological activity. This activity was aimed at collecting reliable information about the colony and developing an academic discourse suitable to justify the Japanese colonial rule by stressing the need of Japanese help in the modernization of the Korean people.⁵ Thus, the colonial government stressed the characterization of Korean people as unable of independent cultural transformation.⁶ The production of such discourse, among other methods, was the result of a strong promotion of archaeological research in the Korean peninsula, the control of such research through several bureaucratic committees and institutions, and the development of a cultural heritage protection structure. After 1905, the colonial government enacted specific legislation for the protection of Korean heritage (1911, Temples and Shrines Laws; 1916, Regulations on the Preservation of Ancient Sites and Relics and its amendments), and organized a museum to display the colonial narrative over Korean ancient history (1915, Government-General Museum) with branches in all the country (1921, Kyōngju; 1939, Puyō; 1940, Kongju Branch museum). In terms of research on Korean archaeology the colonial government organized nationwide surveys of Korean heritage (1909-1914), and archeological excavations (excavation of sites near Kimhae, Kyōngju, and Pyongyang just to mention a few). It also promoted extensively the research of Korean ancient history (1925, Korean History Compilation Committee), and developed at the university level chairs on Korean history for its study and teaching (1926, Jp. Keijō/Kr. Kyōngsōng Imperial University).

Many Japanese archaeologists excavated archaeological sites in Korea with the active support of the colonial period, but among them Fujita Ryōsaku (1892-1960) has a special

⁴ Andrew Gordon, *A modern history of Japan: from Tokugawa times to the present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 74, 113-116.

⁵ Pai Hyung Il, *Heritage Management in Korea and Japan: The Politics of Antiquity and Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013): 115.

⁶ *Ibid.* 157-160

meaning for the study of Korean archaeology periodization. As chief curator of the colonial museum, Korean history chair at Kyōngsōng Imperial University and member of the committee for the Preservation of Ancient Sites and Relics, his understanding of Korean archaeology had a strong impact in the management of Korean heritage and the research on Korean archaeology.⁷ In 1934, he published an article (Korean Ancient History, Jp. Chōsen no Kodai Bunka) with a periodization of Korean archaeology that later reviewed in 1942 (Korean Stone Age, Jp. Chōsen no Sekki Jidai), that became some of the first periodization projects for Korean archaeology.⁸

Table 1. Fujita's periodization of Korean archaeology

Korean Ancient History (Jp. Chōsen no Kodai Bunka) 1934	Korean Stone Age (Jp. Chōsen no Sekki Jidai) 1942
1. Culture of the Stone Age 2. Infiltration of Qin (秦) Culture 3. Lelang and Daifang Commanderies Period 4. Ancient Korean culture	1. Stone Age 2. Chalcolithic Period (金石併用, jp. Kaneishiheyō, kr. Kūmsōkpyōng'yong) 3. Lelang and Daifang Commanderies Period 4. Three (Silla, Paekche, Koguryō) Kingdoms Period

One of the first characteristics of Fujita's periodization project is the spatialization of the peninsula in relation to its cultural characteristics.⁹ Fujita periodized Korean archaeology as part of the Orient theorized by Shiratori Kurakichi (1865-1942), bounding the space of the peninsula with Manchuria as essentialized geo-cultural spaces, sharing some of China's civilizational lacks such as the capacity for cultural progress.¹⁰ In that position, the peninsula was structure as the intermediary space between China and the Japanese archipelago, plying a double role. On the one hand, the peninsula allowed the arrival of continental influences into the archipelago during the ancient times, supporting a view on the origins of the Japanese people as migrating from Manchuria or beyond. On the other hand, once the Chinese influence arrived under the Han dynasty in the form of Chinese commanderies (BC 108-AD 313), the peninsular culture stopped or filtered Chinese influence to Japanese culture. Thus, Fujita could explain the continental origins of the Japanese people, their special connection with Korean people, and avoid the damaging connection with Chinese culture, considered within Japanese orientalism as the cause of Korean cultural stagnation.

Fujita's aim at his periodization was to build a sequence of the formative stages of Korean culture and identify its influences. Thus, he approached Korean archaeology from the perspective of its usefulness to understand the formative moments of Japanese culture.

⁷ Han'guk Pangmulgwan 100-yōnsa P'yōnch'an Wiwōnhoe, ed., *Han'guk Pangmulgwan 100-yōnsa =: The 100 year history of Korean museums*, Ch'op'an (Sōul-si: Kungnip Chungang Pangmulgwan : Han'guk Pangmulgwan Hyōphoe, 2009): 86.

⁸ Ryōsaku Fujita, *Chōsen Kokogaku Kenkyū* (Kyoto: Takagiri shoin, 1948): 1-42.

⁹ Ibid. 43-139.

¹⁰ Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1995): 108.

He identified three cultural elements, key for the development of Korean culture, labelling them an “ancient native culture” (but not Korean), a continental culture imported into the peninsula and influential in the configuration of the Japanese culture, and finally a Chinese cultural influence.¹¹ The identification of these three cultural elements could explain the difference and connections between Korean and Japanese culture without acknowledging a significant role to Chinese culture in the formative moments of Japanese culture. Thus, Fujita’s archaeological theory could support the broader cultural discourse, popular at the time, by which Japanese culture had different roots than Chinese and Korean culture, explaining their cultural dynamism. But at the same time, it allowed the colonial claim over the peninsula and the racial relation between Koreans and Japanese based on the early connections in their origins.

These ideas became represented and clarified in the division of periods. Looking at the names in the article “Korean Ancient History” it is evident that the organizing principle of the periods is the introduction of Chinese culture in the peninsula before the organization of Korean culture, by defining two full periods based on the infiltration first and establishment later of Chinese culture in the peninsula. In addition, the labelling of the closing period as “Ancient Korean culture” would indicate that Korean culture would become established as a result of Chinese culture influence, acquiring its characteristics.

This periodization project with all its cultural bias towards Korean autonomy and capability for cultural evolution would have been received by Koreans scholars after the Liberation in 1945. Those scholars were very aware of the connotations of such frame for Korean archaeology, and many tried to reform it within the academic limits of their time.

South Korean archaeology and an attempt of decolonization: Kim Wōnyong and his book *Introduction to Korean Archaeology* (Kr. Han’guk Kogohak Kaesōl, 1973)

The Liberation of the Korean peninsula in 1945 and its division meant that South Korean scholars had to deal with the problem of reevaluating Japanese discourses about Korean culture within the structure of the Korean division. This evaluation was mediated by authoritarian drift that Syngman Rhee’s and Park Chung Hee’s governments undertook. Such period is represented by the integration of South Korean in the capitalist block during the Cold War, the development of a fierce anticommunist policy and the indefatigable search for Korea’s modernization and economic development. In such context, the different south Korean governments tried to use archaeology to support a nationalist discourse that would provide them the legitimacy to speak for the whole nation, and not just a fragment of it, as evident from their sustained cultural policy.¹² For that purpose, the government reestablished a cultural heritage administration over time.

The field of archaeology also had to deal with the colonial legacy. On its material side, the legacy came in the form of a large collection of artifacts and publications about Korean archaeology preserved in the National Museum of Korea established in 1945 on

¹¹ Fujita, *op. cit.*, 44

¹² Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic nationalism in Korea : genealogy, politics, and legacy* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); Munhwachaech’ōng, *Munhwachaech’ōng 50nyonsa. Bonsap’yōn* (Taejōn: Cultural Heritage Administration, 2011).

the bases of the former colonial museum, and the collections kept at Seoul National Museum, former Imperial University. Both institutions had important libraries with publications on Korean archaeology, as well as some other university libraries defending ideas such as Fujita's periodization. On the human side, the legacy was slightly less controversial, as the colonial regime never allowed any Korean scholar to direct an archaeological research, despite some of them showed their interest and even studied abroad on the subject. Thus, the first generation of South Korean archaeologists was built with scholars who majored in other fields (history, humanities, trade, etc.) in a Japanese university or abroad in Europe, mostly German-speaking universities, during the colonial period, or scholars who graduated after the Liberation. In any case, all of them had to learn who to do fieldwork after South Korea became an independent state.¹³

Kim Wŏnyong stood out among his peers, achieving a central position in the field.¹⁴ After earning working at the National Museum, he was appointed chair at the newly created Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at Seoul National University in 1961. From that position, he had the chance to influence the direction of the field, and particularly important for that purpose was the publication of his *Introduction to Korean Archaeology* (Kr. Han'guk Kogohak Kaesŏl, 1973). This book was one of the first surveys of Korean archaeology published that collected the results of all the excavations done after the colonial period, and tried to reinterpret the periodization established by Fujita Ryōsaku.

Table 2. Kim Wŏnyong's periodization in his *Introduction to Korean Archaeology*

Absolute Chronology	Relative Chronology	
3000 2000	Early Middle	Neolithic Age
1000 ----- 900 800 700	Late	

¹³ Luis Botella, «The Field of Korean Archaeology in South Korea (1945-1979). Power Relations in the Institutionalization and Professionalization of Archaeology» (Malaga, University of Malaga, 2017): 50-97.

¹⁴ Kim Wŏnyong, «Naüi Han'guk Kodae Munhwa Yŏn'gu P'yŏnnyŏk - Chŏsŏwa nonmun chungsimŭro», *Han'guksa Simin'gangjwa* 1 (1987): 116-37.

600 -----	Bronze Age I	
500		
400		
300-----	Bronze Age II	Iron I
200		
100		
B.C.	Iron II (Proto-Three Kingdoms Period)	
1 -----		
A.D.		
100	Three Kingdoms Period	
200		
300 -----		

Kim Wŏnyong represents the new situation of South Korea in the intellectual sphere. On the one hand, he graduated from Keijō/Kyōngsŏng Imperial University right before the end of the war, and before he wrote his manual, used Fujita's books to teach Korean archaeology to his students. On the other, earned a PhD at New York University under the guidance of Alfred Salmony, a specialist on Scythian art, in 1959.¹⁵ Thus, it represents the Japanese intellectual tradition, and the new postwar American influence, and such mix is present also in his periodization project.

The spatialization in Kim's project is slightly different than the one suggested by Fujita. Firstly, it looks to the Korean peninsula as the core area of his interest, and considers the geographical areas around the peninsula as potential sources of influence. Secondly, the region of Manchura-Mongolia-Siberia is privileged as source of cultural influence, as well as China, but without defending any cultural superiority or lacking for it.¹⁶ At the same time, that connection was considered as relevant by Kim's thesis advisor, Alfred Salmony, validating Kim's interest on it.¹⁷ Finally, the influences from Japan, even acknowledged, are diminished in relevance for the origins of Korean culture.¹⁸ Thus, he breaks away from Fujita's orientalism and the assigned cultural characteristics to different regions round the peninsula, despite keeping in place elements.

Also, Kim's focus of his periodization project is slightly different from the one suggested by Fujita. Kim clearly states the origin of Korean culture as the main topic of his

¹⁵ Kim Wŏnyong, *Ibid.*, 116- 118, 121-1124.

¹⁶ Kim Wŏnyong, *Han 'guk Kogohak Kaesŏl* (Sŏul T`ŭkpyŏlsi: Don-a Ch'ulp'ansa Kongmubu, 1973): 47.

¹⁷ Julia Orell, «Early East Asian art history in Vienna and its trajectories: Josef Strzygowski, Karl With, Alfred Salmony», *Journal of Art Historiography* 13, n.º December (2015): 1-32.

¹⁸ Kim Wŏnyong, *op. cit.*, 47

periodization, claiming that cultures are the result of different cultural influences, and in the task of identifying the influences and the formative moment, Kim develops his sequence. This should not be surprising as Kim clearly operated within the limits of the culture-history archaeology and its promotion of national history.¹⁹ This paradigm focused on the analysis of cultural series as means to understand the expansion, change and origins of material culture as indicators of the origins, evolution and change of nations. It was popularized first in Europe by Montelius, but later Japanese scholars also used it, being the dominant archaeological paradigm in the capitalist block until the arrival of the processual archaeology.²⁰

The key that organizes Kim's sequence is the Three-Age system developed by C.J. Thomsen (1788-1865) and Worsaae (1821-1885). Such choice is an indication of Kim's interest to make Korean archaeology comparable with other cultures by using a similar technology as key organizing element and absolute dating (an innovation in archeology since the late 1940s). Thus, it can be interpreted as another attempt to consolidate Korean archaeology, beyond Japanese orientalism, into world archaeology.

In addition, as Fujita's periodization, Kim acknowledged the beginning of the Korean state during the Three Kingdoms Period, but he claims that the Korean nation was formed before, during the Bronze Age period, never acknowledged by colonial archaeologists. In order to prove it, Kim uses aesthetic analysis and identifies a "Korean style" bronze dagger that would be for him the evidence of the establishment of Korean culture.²¹ That aesthetic analysis is also relevant, because it is a direct influence of Alfred Salmony's teaching.²² This identification of the Korean nation in the Bronze Age bypasses the Chinese influence in the formation of Korean culture, being able to assert the independence and autonomy of Korean civilization vis-à-vis Chinese and Japanese cultures.

Conclusion

The colonial legacy in South Korea is present in many aspects of its culture and it still fuels many public debates. For example, there are debates about the inclusion/exclusion of Japanese made buildings during the colonial period as part of Korean heritage. Thus, such legacy cannot be considered as received uncritically. If anything, I believe that the history of the periodization of Korean archaeology can show how such legacy has been present but also critically received and even challenged.

The colonial period used archaeological research to claim its hegemony over Korean culture by assembling and circulating descriptions of Korean culture as lacking in abilities for independent cultural evolution. Thus, the colonial regime could claim the need of Japan's assistance for Korea to reach the stage of advanced, "modern" nations. Archaeology supported that claim by defining Chinese cultural influences as negative for

¹⁹ Kim Wönyong, «Korean Archaeology Today», *Korea Journal* 21, n.º 9 (1981): 22-23

²⁰ Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, 2. ed., repr (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009): 211-311.

²¹ Kim Wönyong, *Han'guk Kogohak Kaesöl* (Söul T'ükpyölsi: Don-a Ch'ulp'ansa Kongmubu, 1973): 76-99

²² Kim Wönyong, «Naüi Han'guk Kodae Munhwa Yön'gu P'yönnyök - Chösöwa nonmun chungsimüro», *Han'guksa Simin'gangjwa* 1 (1987): 121-123

modernization and by stating the fundamental influence of Chinese culture in the origins of Korean culture. Kim tried to challenge such discourse by redefining one of the most basic frames of reference in the field of archaeology: periodization. He was capable of getting rid of the strongest versions of orientalism present in Fujita's model by introducing and setting Korean archaeology in world archaeology. However, by operating within the limits of the culture-historical archaeology, Kim was responsible of continuing some elements already present in colonial discourse (the definition of material culture as indicators of nations in the past), but also validated and used by other scholars unrelated to the colonial experience and debate. Thus, there was no incentive for challenging such views, as they were validated by the intellectual community as basic instruments of analysis and research.

The comparison between Kim's and Fujita's periodization projects, I think, shows the fruitfulness of analyzing particular elements in depth and in broader contexts than the colonial/postcolonial relationships of continuity and discontinuity. This story about periodization shows that the colonial legacy can be not considered just in terms of continuity/discontinuity or in terms of acceptance/rejection. There is the possibility of looking into them and consider the critical relationships of Koreans with such legacy. It also allows us to think about a decolonization process to the moment in which the legacy starts being examined. It also shows how this process of examination can be fruitfully informed if the new Cold War conditions of South Korea are brought into the conversation. By doing so, it is possible to understand better why some colonially originated aspects continued after the colonial rule ended.