

History of Korea - Part 5

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Japan and Korea are close neighbors. From Incheon International airport to Narita near Tokyo it is a two hour flight. Korean golfers, to avoid exorbitant prices domestically, book a tee-time and hop a flight over to Japan. Back for dinner and drinks in Seoul. The culture and even the languages have a lot of common ground. Yet, as with many close neighbors and even siblings, there is no love lost between the two East Asian stand outs. Throughout their long history of living side by side, they have interacted and clashed many times. It all began long ago on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula that is closest to the Japanese islands. The Gaya confederation was an outgrowth of the Samhan confederations in particular Byeon han. We know Gaya was located in the central southern portion of the Korean peninsula between Baekje and Silla, the exact borders and towns that made up the confederacy aren't as well known and can vary depending on which sources are providing the information.[1] The founding of Gaya dates from between the 1st and 2nd century, depending on if the Byeonhan Confederacy of the Samhan Period is included as early Gaya history.[2] As for the specifics of the founding of the Gaya Confederacies, one myth claims that six golden eggs came down from heaven and after twelve days they hatched and out came the first rulers of the six Gayas.

Due to insufficient texts from the time period, little is known about the daily life in the Gaya Confederacy. Like the other three Korean kingdoms, they practiced Buddhism and shamanism. They existed in as many as eight walled cities, were independent and each had a king or head man. They were wedged between two aggressive kingdoms, Baekje and Shilla so had to fight hard and continuously for independence. Although parts were annexed over the centuries by Baekje and Silla, the last of the Gaya Confederacy fell to Silla in 562 CE. The controversies surrounding Gaya have to do with its relationship with Japan. Gaya was very close to Japan and it was reachable by short voyages. Gaya was able to provide things that were needed by Japan, iron and harness parts. Gaya was also relatively close to China and was able to be the middleman in cultural exchanges. I've heard many times that Korea was the origin of much of Japanese culture. In retaliation for such boastful nationalistic claims, Japan claims that an early Japanese emperor colonized Korea calling it Mimana.

The Japanese text the Nihon Shoki was compiled in 720 CE. This text is the second oldest Japanese history text and is treated as essential to and the basis of Japanese history. It includes detailed information on the founding myths of Japan through the reigns of Japanese emperors up to the completion of the text, but there is also information in the Nihon Shoki on the relationship between Japan and the Korean Peninsula, including with Gaya (which in Japanese sources is called Mimana or Imna). In regard to the Korean Peninsula, the text covers many topics including delegations sent and received by the Japanese state of Yamato (also known as Wa), movement of the Yamato-Wa troops and wars fought on the Korean Peninsula, and even mentions important events on the Korean Peninsula, some of which include Gaya.

This text clearly shows that Yamato-Wa and the Korean Peninsula interacted with one another, but Japanese scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries claimed the relationship between these two went further:

Yamato-Wa had control over part of the Korean Peninsula, specifically Gaya. This mainly came from sections which discuss the establishment of colonies somewhere to the west of Yamato-Wa. Japanese scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries then claimed that the colony known in the Nihon Shoki as Mimana was actually the same as the Korean Gaya Confederacy. Historians, specifically North and South Koreans dispute this one sided presentation and propose other possibilities. This is not just a historical disagreement due to the use of Gaya by the Japanese as a justification for the Occupation of Korea, which by Korean accounts at least was quite brutal at times, Korean scholars have pushed back against the idea that Gaya and Mimana were the same and have presented other theories instead. One theory as proposed by a North Korean scholar actually claims Mimana was a Gaya settlement on the Japanese mainland, and if this were true, would have interesting implications about who owns Japan. Of course in North Korea they claim that Kim Jong un shot a hole in one on his first outing on the links. The current most commonly accepted theory by scholars on both sides is that Mimana was some sort of embassy in Gaya to help facilitate diplomatic relations between Gaya and Japan. It is unlikely either side will ever definitively prove their argument, at least not in the near future, and will likely continue the debate over the Gaya-Mimana conflict. And why wouldn't such a great leader hit a hole in one on his first day, no proof needed.

The Unified Shilla Kingdom was the highest point of Buddhist culture in Korea. During the Unified Shilla period, (668-935 CE), Buddhism flourished and became a dominant force in Korean society. It was a golden age for art and culture. There were significant developments in Buddhist philosophy as well as the synchrony of existing schools. Buddhism supported the government and in turn the government supported Buddhism. The government promoted state Protection Buddhism by building elaborate temples, in shapes of mandalas, around the country to protect it by magic. Monks from Shilla traveled to Tang Dynasty China to study and research. They returned with sutras, doctrines, and practices. They also brought back new sects like Pure Land Buddhism and Chan Buddhism, known in Japan as Zen Buddhism and Seon Buddhism in Korea. Buddhism played an important role in cultural development, building many temples, sutras, and creating sutras.

The Unified Shilla Kingdom was created when Shilla, allied with The Tang Chinese dynasty, fought and finally dominated Baekje in 663 CE and Goguryeo in 668. This illustrates the perils of inviting hungry ambitious neighbors into an intramural fight. Shilla Queen Seondeok invited Tang China into her struggle against Goguryeo and Baekje who had temporarily allied to attack Shilla. In the midst of the bitter fight to dominate the peninsula Tang was invited to join Silla and they obliged by sending an amphibious force against Baekje in 660. Baekje invited Yamato, Japan to the fight. By 663 after more than a few battles, Baekje and Yamato were defeated and Tang assumed control over Baekje territory. The precedent had been set and Korea often invited China or Japan into fights and at the conclusion of the fights they did not leave. Culminating in the 40 year occupation by Japan in 1910-1945.

As the hostilities continued against Baekje, Tang China allied with Shilla forces turned on Goguryeo. Beginning in 634, Tang fought successive wars with Goguryeo. The Koreans were able to turn back the Chinese in the first two rounds. Until Tang allied with Silla in 668. Goguryeo was finally crushed and Tang attempted to swallow up all the Goguryeo territory.

By the end of the years of war, the Tang Empire had taken control over the former territories of Baekje and Goguryeo and tried to assert dominion over Silla. Large parts of the Korean Peninsula were occupied by the Tang forces for about a decade.

In 668, following the Goguryeo-Tang War, despite the fall of both the Goguryeo and Baekje Kingdoms, the peninsula was still not united under the control of Silla as the Korean Kingdom had to continually struggle to eject the Chinese. Silla's efforts were aided by revolts/uprisings in the territories of the former Korean Kingdoms, notably Goguryeo; the first revolt of the people of Goguryeo took place in 669. Revolts in the former territories of Goguryeo took place almost yearly and while not successful in driving the Chinese out, they were certainly a torn in the Chinese administration's side like any insurgency.. In 675 the Tang attacked Silla and defeated them in Gyeonggi. In response Munmu of Silla dispatched a tributary mission to Tang with apologies. Gaozong accepted Munmu's apology, luckily Tang had other fish to fry in the form of a rebellion in Tibet, and withdrew its troops from Korea. Seeing the Tang's strategic weakness, Silla renewed the advance on Tang territory. Once the Chinese were gone Silla consolidated the people and territory of the Three Kingdoms under the Age unified Silla banner. There were holdouts to the far north, Balhae was a multiethnic kingdom claimed by China, Russia, and Korea. It covered the territories of the northern part of the Korean peninsula, Northeast China, and Mongolia. Existing from 668 CE until it was conquered by marauding tribes out of the east in 926 CE. Balhae is a historic enigma. Not sure where it came from, who made up its citizens, or what its place in history is.

For years in Korea, Balhae was known as the northern dynasty while Silla was called the Southern dynasty. Unified Shilla, after the passage of more than a few years, allowed Koreans to feel they were one people. Balhae interfered with that and so caused some bad feelings.