

A Study on the Identity of the Ancient Wa in Northeast Asia

Tong Park¹

¹ Social Policy Research Division, KRIVET, Sejong City, Korea

Correspondence: Tong Park, Social Policy Research Division, KRIVET, Sejong City, Korea. E-mail: inmypark@krivet.re.kr

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Abstract

This study reexamines the nature of the “Wa,” regarded as the ancestors of the Japanese, through a comparative analysis of historical records from Korea, China, and Japan; an investigation into the migrations of the Dongyi Wa clans and the geographical distribution of place names; the Posang Eight States War that unfolded along the maritime routes of the Gaya region in the 3rd century CE; and the *Gwanggaeto Stele inscription*. The findings reveal that, contrary to the assumption by both scholars and the general public that the Wa were identical with the Japanese, the Wa of ancient Northeast Asia originated in the Zhejiang region of southern China and established a strong presence in southern Korea. In the early 3rd century, they fought two wars—the Posang Eight States War—in the Gaya region. As a result, the Mahan Yuezhi-guk grew into a political entity that dominated Silla, Gaya, and the Shipje in the Hanseong area (Seoul). Following King Gwanggaeto’s conquest campaigns in the late 4th to early 5th centuries, the Mahan–Baekje forces in the Geum River basin were defeated, prompting their migration to the Japanese archipelago, where they founded Wa–Baekje and transformed into what is known as the Japanese Wa. In conclusion, rather than the Japanese Wa crossing over to the Korean Peninsula to establish the so-called Mimana Japan Headquarters, it was in fact the Wa of the Korean Peninsula who migrated in large numbers to the archipelago to found a state, and the archipelago remained subordinate to Mahan–Baekje until the 7th century.

Keywords: Wa, Dongyi Wa, Korean Peninsula Wa, Mahan–Baekje and Wa relations, Posang Eight States War

1. Wa-related Artifacts and Sites in the Yeongsan River Basin: Toward Defining the Identity of Wa

In the Yeongsan River basin, centered on Naju in South Jeolla Province, Korea, there are as many as fifteen keyhole-shaped burial mounds. These mounds appear only in the peripheral areas of Bannam, the region’s ancient political center. In Bokam-ri, Naju, so-called “apartment-type” tombs have yielded Wa-style burials and artifacts, while genetic analysis of human remains from Yeongdong-ri indicates a closer affinity to modern Japanese than to Koreans.

The Geumsan-ri tomb in Hampyeong, the largest in the Yeongsan River basin, is presumed to be of royal scale. Its structure reflects a burial style characteristic of the Japanese archipelago, and excavations have revealed clay figurines, pottery, and other items. In particular, the practice of covering the tomb’s outer façade with tile-like stones is recognized as a funerary custom from the archipelago.

At the twin mounds of Naedong-ri in Yeongam, archaeologists recovered glass beads, sheet-metal pendants, and fragments of gilt-bronze crowns closely resembling National Treasure No. 295, the gilt-bronze crown of Tomb No. 9 in Sinchon-ri, Naju. These finds confirm that the tomb’s occupants belonged to the highest-ranking elite of the time. Furthermore, animal-shaped ornamental finials—common in burials of the Japanese archipelago—were unearthed from the surrounding ditch, further underscoring the site’s cultural ties to the archipelago.

Taken together, the abundance of Wa-origin artifacts from the Yeongsan River basin demonstrates that the politics of this region maintained a deeply intertwined relationship with the Wa.

However, the discovery of such Wa-related remains often triggers discomfort and guarded suspicion—sentiments rooted in historical vulnerability. The concern is that these finds might be misinterpreted as supporting the so-called “Mimana Japan Headquarters” theory. This theory claims that, in the late 4th century CE, the Yamato Wa from the Japanese archipelago advanced into the southern Korean Peninsula, subjugated Baekje, Silla, and Gaya, and in Gaya’s case established an administrative office known as the Mimana Japan Headquarters.

The narrative rests largely on the *Nihon Shoki*, which in the section on Empress Jingū recounts a legendary episode in

which the Wa crossed to the Korean Peninsula and conquered the “Seven Kingdoms” of Gaya.

It further claims that Himiko, who ended the Great Wa Civil War in 179 CE and ascended as queen, did not die in 247 CE, but lived for over two centuries, conquering the Gaya and Mahan regions in 369 CE and ruling the southern Korean Peninsula until 562 CE. This interpretation, popularized by Suematsu Yasukazu’s *History of the Rise and Fall of Mimana* (1949), has been discredited for its internal contradictions, yet remains dormant and liable to reemerge. As a result, the excavation of Wa-related artifacts in Korea is often met not with pride, but with unease.

This reveals that we still lack a precise understanding of the true nature of the Wa and have yet to reach scholarly consensus on their relationship with the Yeongsan River polities. In particular, the entrenched tendency among some mainstream historians to treat these polities as entirely separate from the Wa—and to anachronistically reinterpret Empress Jingū simply as King Geunchogo of Baekje—has resulted in a self-deprecating distortion of history, a recurring pattern observed in response to new archaeological findings.

A clear, evidence-based understanding of the Wa’s origins, identity, and historical ties with the Yeongsan River region is essential for producing more accurate and forward-looking interpretations. To this end, this study analyzes the earliest records of the Wa from Korea, China, and Japan to reconstruct their formative history and explore their transregional connections with both the Yeongsan River polities and the Japanese archipelago. These questions are examined through first-hand sources, including China’s *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) and the other Twenty-Five Histories, Japan’s *Nihon Shoki*, and Korea’s *Samguk Sagi* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*) and *Samguk Yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*), with the aim of establishing a historically grounded understanding of the ancient Wa.

2. Definition of the Wa Based on Early Historical Records

In modern scholarship, it has generally been assumed—often without scrutiny—that the term *Wa* referred to the ancient Japanese. Within Korean academia, one mainstream historian even dismissed the “Wa in the Korean Peninsula” hypothesis as nothing more than an endorsement of the “Imna Japan Headquarters” theory. As a result, both public and scholarly discourse has tended to equate *Wa* exclusively with ancient Japan.

However, an examination of early historical sources from China, Korea, and Japan reveals that the earliest records of the *Wa* appear not in Japanese chronicles but in Chinese texts. According to Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, “*Annals of Zhou*,” Wu Taibo voluntarily gave up his claim to the throne and, along with his brother Zhongyong, took refuge among the Man tribes, adopting their customs of body tattooing and cropped hair.

“When the eldest son, Taibo, and his younger brother, Zhongyong, learned that Gugong intended to pass the throne to Jili, they fled together to the land of the Man, tattooed their bodies, and cut their hair, thereby yielding the kingship to Jili.”

Following the *Shiji*, works such as *Sanguozhi* (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*) appear to classify all people who cut their hair short and tattooed their bodies as “Wa,” regardless of their political status.

Thus, the term “Wa” can be defined primarily as referring to ancient peoples who practiced body tattooing and hair-cutting. In this sense, although the *Shiji* does not explicitly use the term “Wa”, it clearly conveys that Wu Taibo, by tattooing his body and cutting his hair, became regarded as an ancestor of the Wa.

The reasons for the Wa’s practice of tattooing and hair-cutting appear to be twofold: first, to prevent long hair from becoming cumbersome during aquatic activities, and second, to protect themselves from large fish and aquatic animals. In this regard, the *Wei zhi*, “*Account of the Wa People*” in the *Sanguozhi* records the following:

“When Xiahou Suogang’s son was enfeoffed in Kuaiji, he cut his hair and tattooed his body to avoid harm from mythical aquatic creatures. Today, the coastal people of Wa enjoy entering the water to catch fish and shellfish. Their tattoos serve to ward off large fish and aquatic animals, but in later times they gradually came to use them as decoration.”

Furthermore, the *Shiji*, “*Hereditary House of Zhao*” describes the customs of the State of Yue and the State of Wu as follows:

“They cut their hair short, tattoo their bodies, engrave patterns on their arms, and fasten their clothing with the left lapel over the right—these are the customs of the Ouyue people. Blackening their teeth, engraving patterns on their foreheads, wearing caps made of fish skin, and garments woven from coarse cloth are the customs of the State of Wu.”

According to the *Shiji*, “*Annals of Duke Zhou of Lu*,” and the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* (*Zuo tradition: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”*), Duke Ai, 7th year (488 BCE), King Fuchai of Wu attacked the State of Qi, pushed into the region of Zeng, and demanded a ceremonial tribute consisting of an ox, a sheep, and a pig from the State of Lu. Lu submitted and presented the tribute. Later, Zigong was dispatched to persuade King Fuchai in accordance with ritual

protocol, during which a reference to the Wa appears..

“Ji Kangzi sent Zigong to persuade the King of Wu and his Grand Preceptor Pi. Zigong attempted to convince them by citing the *Rites of Zhou*. The King of Wu replied, ‘I have tattoos on my body, so do not speak to me of propriety.’ At this, Zigong desisted.” (Shiji, “*Annals of Duke Zhou of Lu*”).

“After the death of Wu Taibo, his younger brother Zhongyong succeeded to his position. He cut his hair short, tattooed his body, and adorned himself while naked.” (Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Duke Ai, 7th year).

Also, in the Shiji, “*Annals of King Goujian of Yue*,” while describing Goujian’s ancestors and the process of establishing their capital, it is noted that the people of Yue practiced tattooing and cutting their hair short.

“The ancestor of King Goujian of Yue was the illegitimate son of King Shaokang of the Xia dynasty and a descendant of Yu the Great. His forebears were enfeoffed in the land of Kuaiji and served in the ancestral rites of Yu. They tattooed their bodies and cut their hair short, clearing vegetation and reclaiming wasteland to establish their capital.”

Shiji, “*Hereditary House of Wu Taibo*” records in detail how Wu Taibo became the founder of the State of Wu. Together with his younger brother Zhongyong, he fled to Xiongmian—identified with present-day Wuxi in Jiangsu Province—near the Yangtze River. Adopting local customs, they tattooed their bodies and cut their hair to show they would not seek the Zhou throne, and, by the acclamation of the local people, founded the state of Gouwu.

Wu Taibo left before the founding of the Zhou dynasty, and his nephew Chang’s son, King Wu, established Zhou in 1046 BCE. This indicates that as early as the 12th century BCE or earlier, the Xiongmian region was already inhabited by tattooed, short-haired Wa people.

Next, the term *Wa* also refers to people who lived along the coast or major rivers, engaged in rice cultivation, fishing, or maritime trade. In the lower Yangtze River region of Zhejiang Province, pottery unearthed from the Shangshan site, dated to 10,000 years ago, and the Xiaohuangshan site, dated to 9,000 years ago, contained large quantities of grain mixed into the clay, indicating that rice cultivation had begun in this area long ago.

To distinguish these Wa who lived in China and the Korean Peninsula from those in the Japanese Archipelago, we shall refer to them as *Proto-Wa*.

The state of Wu prospered by planting mulberry trees to raise silkworms, producing ceramics, smelting bronze, and mastering techniques of fortress construction. In particular, Wu Zixu, who defected from Chu to Wu, developed advanced shipbuilding and navigation skills, transforming Wu into a maritime power. From this, it can be seen that the proto-Wa were centered along coasts and riverbanks, engaging in both fishing and wet-rice cultivation, producing various trade goods such as textiles and jade, and actively participating in maritime commerce. In short, they were merchants who dominated the seas.

Subsequently, Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* contains the first explicit reference to the term “Wa people”. It records that during the reign of King Cheng of Zhou (1043–1021 BCE), “In the Zhou era, the realm was at peace; Yue-shang offered a white pheasant, and the Wa people presented *changcao*”. In this account, Yue-shang refers to a polity located south of Jiaozhi, while the Wa people indicate the inhabitants of the Yangtze River basin in the state of Wu. This shows that both ordinary merchants and tattooed, short-haired Wa coexisted in the Huiji and Wu regions centered around the Yangtze River estuary. *Changcao*, also called *Changpu* (sweet flag), was primarily used in ritual ceremonies, and its main production area was in southern China. In this regard, Egami Namio (1984), who proposed the Horse-Rider Theory, clearly stated in his research on the origins of the Japanese people and state that *changcao* was not produced in Japan. Furthermore, Torigoe Kensaburō (1982), through his analysis of the *Bencao Gangmu* (*Compendium of Materia Medica*), argued that the homeland of the Wa people was located in Sichuan Province, China.¹

The *Shan Hai Jing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) also contains the following account: “The Kingdom of Gai is located south of Great Yan and north of Wa, and Wa belongs to Yan” (*Shan Hai Jing*, “*Hainei Beijing*”). Here, “Great Yan” refers to the powerful state of Yan during the reign of King Zhao of Yan (311–279 BC), and “Gai” is interpreted as a region near the Bohai Gulf, not far from the Great Wall of Yan. From this, it can be inferred that the Wa people were widely distributed, not only in the Wu, Yue, and Chu regions, but also in areas near the Bohai Gulf. Regarding the

¹ Sekine Hideyuki (2013) introduced discussions such as Egami Namio’s theory of the southern origin and migration of the Wa, as well as those of Kokubu Naoichi and Torigoe Kensaburō, examining the implications of these theories for the origins of the Japanese people and evaluating them from an interdisciplinary perspective.

record that “Wa belonged to Yan,” Egami Namio considered it to indicate that the Wa had entered the Yan territory for the purpose of trade. Kim Seong-ho (2000: 105) likewise argued that “the Wa belonging to Yan were not in Langya, Shandong, but in Zhenfan near Mount Jieshi, a trading port of the Yan kingdom for immortal elixirs.”

On the Shandong Peninsula, several indigenous Dongyi tribes—most notably the Wu’i and the Lai—were active and played significant roles in the region’s early history. Archaeological evidence indicates that Shandong followed a distinct cultural trajectory from the Neolithic period onward, separate from that of the Central Plains. This cultural sequence includes the Houli, Beixin, Dawenkou, Longshan, and Yueshi cultures, which spanned approximately 8,500 to 3,900 years ago (Wang Qing, 2018: 83). It is likely that the Wu’i and Lai peoples interacted with or influenced the Wa through trade, migration, and cultural exchange. According to the *Guanzi*, they utilized dense forests to smelt copper and boiled seawater to produce salt. While people in inland China consumed mountain salt, most regions depended on salt from the Shandong Peninsula.

The Wu’i and Lai people used copper to make bronze implements and processed salt to produce salted seafood products, which they supplied to inland areas. Among seafood products, fermented fish sauces were the most convenient way to consume salt. Fermented fish sauce was one of the distinctive food cultures created by the Dongyi. The Wu’i and Lai people are also recorded as having mediated trade in fine-textured leather between Gojoseon and the State of Qi (Park Hyeong-jun, 2007: 21).

As indicated in the *Shan Hai Jing*, if the territory of the proto-Wa extended as far north as the State of Yan, then the Dongyi tribes of Wu’i and Lai may also be considered part of the Wa sphere. Given that tattooing and hair-cropping were customary among coastal Dongyi groups under the influence of Yan, as well as in the regions of Wu, Yue, and Chu, it is likely that the waterside communities among the Wu’i and Lai people followed the same practices. The fact that the Wa were widely distributed from the Shandong Peninsula to the Yan region is also confirmed in the *Book of Han*, “*Treatise on Geography*,” compiled during the Later Han period. The following account shows that in the islands of the Bohai Gulf, the proto-Wa had formed multiple polities and lived there.

“In the middle of the sea of Lelang lies the land of the Wa people, divided into over a hundred kingdoms. They come at set times to offer tribute and present themselves.”

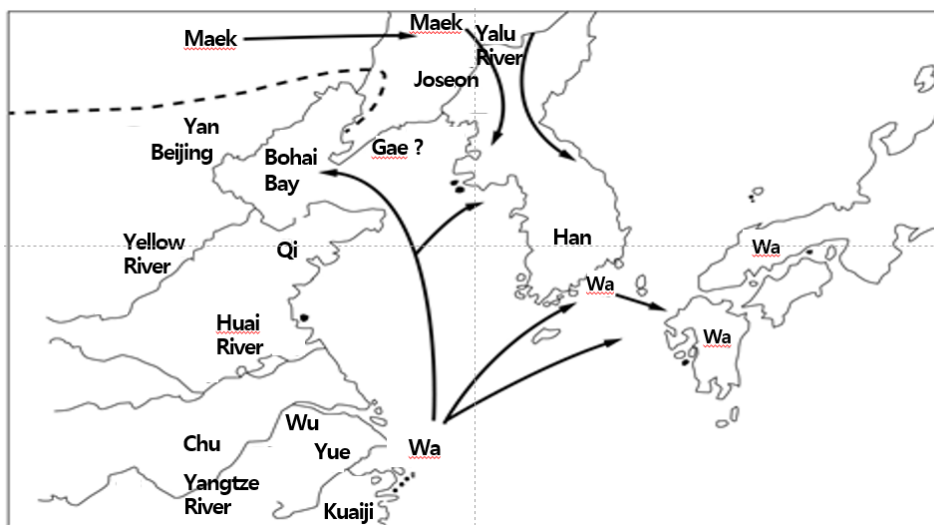


Figure 1. Northeast Asia in the Warring States and Western Han Periods (4th–2nd centuries BC)

Source: Egami Namio (1984: 117)

Here, Lelang is interpreted as referring to Lelang Commandery, one of the Han commanderies. However, if Lelang were located in Pyongyang on the Korean Peninsula, the claim that there were over one hundred polities along its coast would be untenable, as there are few large islands near Pyongyang. Therefore, further discussion on this point is unnecessary. If Lelang was indeed situated in Liaodong, Youzhou, then, as shown in [Figure 1] presented by Egami Namio, it can be interpreted that Wa polities existed along the Bohai Bay coast and on various islands in the middle of the sea. Egami (1984: 116–121) argued that the Wa described in the *Shan Hai Jing* and the *Book of Han*, “*Treatise on Geography*” were not located in Japan but in other maritime regions, as illustrated in [Figure 1]. Consequently, Lelang would also have been situated in the Bohai Bay region. Furthermore, the *Hou Hanshu* (*Book of the Later Han*), in “the biography of the Xianbei,” even records an incident in which Wa people, skilled in net fishing, were captured to resolve food shortages.

“In the first year of the Guanghe era (178 CE), in winter, ... Tanshihuai of the Xianbei personally toured the newly conquered lands. At Wuhou, he saw the Qin River, a vast body of water stretching hundreds of *li* from north to south, which stood still without flowing. There were fish in it, but they could not be caught. Having heard that the Wa people were skilled at net fishing, he attacked the Wa state to the east, captured over a thousand households, relocated them to the Qin River, and ordered them to ‘catch fish to secure food supplies.’”

Therefore, records about the Wa found in various Chinese historical texts show that the original Wa were located not in the Japanese archipelago, but in the Chinese mainland. In other words, the original Wa were widely distributed from the Huiji region of China to the Huaihai area, the Shandong Peninsula, the Yan state, and throughout the entire Bohai Bay region.

However, the Yangtze River basin—once considered uncivilized by the Zhou dynasty—is now recognized as having developed a more advanced culture than the Zhou itself. In the Zhejiang region, where Wu Taibo was enthroned as king, a sophisticated civilization had already emerged prior to the Zhou. During the Shang and Zhou periods, its people produced celadon ware of the highest quality in the world.

In later times, the states of Wu and Yue engaged in constant warfare for supremacy over the Yangtze basin and the Huai River–Shandong Peninsula region. Eventually, King Goujian of Yue advanced as far as Langya in Shandong. After conquering Wu, Yue feared the state’s restoration and reduced Suzhou to ruins. As a result, the people of Wu took to the sea, adopted “Wu” as their clan name, and became known as the Wa. Not long afterward, Yue itself was conquered by Chu and its people also became part of the Wa.

During the Wu, Yue, and Chu periods, the Huai–Dai region and the Yangtze River basin were inhabited by Dongyi peoples such as the Seoi and the Huaiyi. Among them were a considerable number of Wa who wore their hair cropped, tattooed their bodies, and claimed descent from Wu Taibo. Therefore, the Wa who were initially included among the Dongyi can be referred to as the “Dongyi Wa” who resided in China.

In short, the coastal areas of the Huai–Dai region along the East China Sea were entirely the domain of the proto-Wa. Therefore, the proto-Wa can be regarded as a branch of the Dongyi. Considering that the state of Yue advanced as far as Langya on the Shandong Peninsula and that the proto-Wa extended into the Yan territory, it can be inferred that the Shandong Wu’i and Lai were also called Wa. They produced ceramics (in Kuaiji), cotton textiles (in Shandong), various marine products (such as salted seafood), and copper (bronze artifacts), expanding their economic power through trade. In particular, they served as intermediaries in the pelt trade between Gojoseon and the state of Qi, thereby amassing great wealth.

However, the Dongyi Wa people of the Central Plains disappear from all Chinese records immediately after Qin Shi Huang’s unification in 221 BCE. At the same time, the Dongyi peoples of the Central Plains also cease to be mentioned. Only in the *Dongyi* sections of the *Lie Zhuan* (“Biographies of the Eastern Barbarians”) in the Twenty-Five Histories do the Dongyi and Wa appear. Where, then, did the Dongyi Wa of the Central Plains go?

3. Review of Records Related to the Dongyi Wa in the Korean Peninsula

In contrast to the disappearance of Wa-related records in Chinese historical texts, references to the Wa begin to appear frequently in the Korean Peninsula after the 1st century BC. In the “*Silla Annals*” of the *Samguk Sagi*, an entry dated to 50 BC states that “The Wa raised troops to invade the border, but, upon hearing of the sacred virtue of the founder, they withdrew.” We can refer to the Wa that appear in the *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa* prior to AD 500 as the “Wa within the Korean Peninsula.”

Regarding the migration period of the Dongyi Wa, it is presumed that the movement of the Dongyi Wa people was particularly active during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC, continuous wars—first between the States of Wu and Yue, then the destruction of Wu and later Yue by Chu, and finally Chu’s fall to Qin—created waves of war refugees.

After the fall of the State of Wu in 473 BC, King Goujian of Yue thoroughly destroyed it. Sima Qian, in *Shiji*, referred to this devastation as *Wuxu* (the Ruins of Wu). Ultimately, the people of Wu who were driven to Langye on the Shandong Peninsula faced two choices: flee inland to the States of Song or Chu, or escape by sea.

The forces of Yue met the same fate as Wu when they were defeated by Chu in 306 BC and destroyed. As recorded in the *Book of Han*, “*Treatise on Geography*,” many refugees from Wu and Yue eventually drifted into the Bohai Strait. In this process, the Wu and Yue forces—though mortal enemies—were compelled by fate to share the same boats.

The surname Wu was adopted by the people of the fallen state of Wu in ancient China. Following the collapse of their kingdom, some descendants migrated to the Korean Peninsula. In Korea, the surname—while using the same Chinese character—came to be romanized as Oh, reflecting phonetic and linguistic differences. Thus, the Chinese Wu and

Korean Oh surnames are distinct in modern spelling and pronunciation, yet share a common ancestral origin.

According to ancient Chinese records, the phrase “Heishan zai Wu”(Heishan was in [the territory of] Wu) indicates that the region known as Heishan (literally “Black Mountain”) was part of the ancestral territory of the Wu clan during the era of the Nine Provinces. Notably, both the Chinese Wu lineage and the Korean Oh lineage seem to have embraced the toponym Heishan—known as Heuksan in Korea and Kuroyama in Japan—as a symbolic or geographic reference. This suggests that the name Heishan functioned as a shared ancestral reference across cultures, rooted in the legacy of the ancient Wu state and transmitted through various diasporic branches in East Asia.

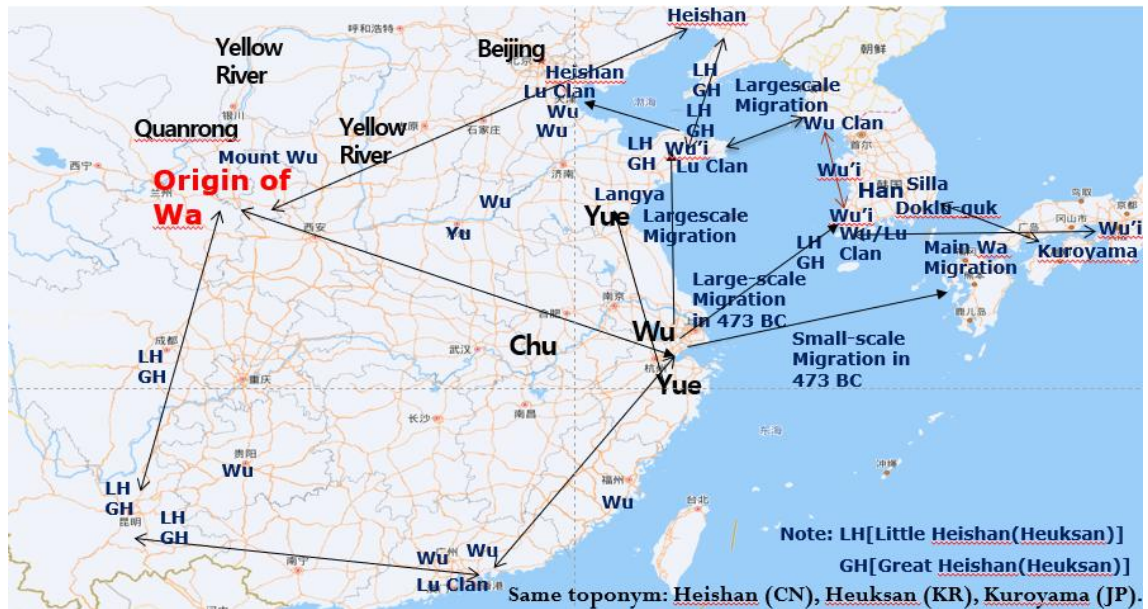


Figure 2. Migration Routes of the Wu People as Wa after the Fall of Wu (473 BC)

Source: Drawn by the author on Google Maps

The Wu clan is believed to have originated as part of the Dongyi tribal group known as the Quanrong during antiquity, and is traced back to Wushan (Mount Wu) located northwest of present-day Xi'an. As they migrated, they frequently left place names such as “Wu” or “Heishan” (both Little and Great Heishan). As shown in [Figure 2], following the fall of the State of Wu, a large number of Wu people established power bases at sea, founding numerous states along the coasts and islands of the Bohai Bay area.

Expelled from the Shandong Peninsula, many of them crossed the sea and settled in the nearby Haeju region of the Korean Peninsula. There, they established the area as their ancestral homeland and became known as the Haeju Oh clan. Some later moved to the coastal regions of Jeollanam-do, including Naju, Boseong, and Hwasun.

After the core forces of the Wu and Yue peoples migrated to the Korean Peninsula, the State of Chu, which had unified southern China, was itself conquered by the Qin in 223 BC, forcing its people to suffer the pain of dispersion. Among the various states that later formed the confederation of Mahan, the polities of Chori-guk and Chosando-biri-guk are interpreted as having been founded by those who left Chu during this period.

In 221 BC, following the unification of China by Qin Shi Huang, large waves of Dongyi people migrated to the Korean Peninsula and surrounding regions. This was because Qin Shi Huang imposed harsh repression on clans and Confucian scholars. Qin Shi Huang harshly repressed Confucian scholars—famously through the “burning of books and burying of scholars”—and enforced the *gaishan weimin* policy, dissolving traditional clans. He also mobilized subjugated peoples for various Qin military and labor projects.

Accordingly, it is believed that the Dongyi Wa gradually shifted their center of activity to the Korean Peninsula. During this period, numerous fangshi (magicians or alchemists) of Dongyi origin—such as Xu Fu and Lu Sheng—fled to the Korean Peninsula after pledging to Qin Shi Huang that they would procure an elixir of immortality. Leading thousands of youths from the southeastern regions, they migrated across the sea.

As the Wa originally inhabited coastal areas, possessed excellent navigation skills, and operated large ships, such a migration would have been relatively feasible. The Dongyi Wa are thought to have first crossed the sea via the Shandong Peninsula and reached the Korean Peninsula, settling in locations such as Haeju in Hwanghae Province,

which lies close to Shandong.

They are believed to have received assistance from indigenous groups in the region—specifically, the Wu'i people, who were based in Yanggok area, and the Lai people, represented by the Lu and Mo clans, who occupied the Jiaodong Peninsula.²

The migration route of the Wa people aligns with the movement paths of the Yuezhi and Wu-Yue tribes. Decisive archaeological evidence for the migration of Dongyi peoples through the Shandong region is the discovery of Chinese-style bronze swords at Gangnim-ri in Wanju and Chopo-ri in Hampyeong, Jeollabuk-do. These artifacts are considered among the very few tangible relics that confirm cultural exchange between ancient Korea and ancient China (Lee Cheong-gyu, 2018).

The Wu'i, a principal branch of the Buyeo people, later became a founding clan of Baekje and played a central role in its establishment. Yanggok, associated with the Wu'i, is mentioned in both ancient Chinese texts and Korean epigraphs as the original founding site of Baekje. The Jiaodong Peninsula, inhabited by the Lai people, served as a vital maritime base and departure point. The Lai people are believed to be the ancestral origin of the Lu clan, which later produced the ruling house of the Yan state founded by the Murong Xianbei during the Sixteen Kingdoms period.

Another migratory path seems to have led the Dongyi Wa from the Zhoushan Archipelago at the mouth of the Zhejiang region across the southern sea route, ultimately reaching the southern coast of Jeollanam-do.

The “Dongyi Wa” who migrated to the Korean Peninsula, along with other Dongyi groups, are believed to have continually moved into the southwestern part of the peninsula, establishing numerous coastal states and forming the Posang Eight States confederation. In 42 CE, with the founding of Kim Suro's Gaya Kingdom in the Gimhae region, conflicts began to emerge between them, likely due to the differing ethnic origins of the ruling clans—the Kim clan being descendants of the Xiongnu nomads, a people known for their reverence for gold, while the Wu'i clan traced their roots to the Buyeo people. The Kim clan's Gaya was founded on the basis of powerful iron weaponry and maintained its dynasty until the early 3rd century CE. Nevertheless, it remained in constant conflict with the Buyeo-descended Wu'i clan, as well as the Na, Lu, and Mo Xianbei tribes, and the Wu, Yue, and Chu people who frequented the Yeongsan River area and traveled to and from the Japanese archipelago.

In the *Samguk Sagi*, a Wa man named Hogong, who crossed over to Silla, is shown serving as Prime Minister under Park Hyeokgeose and participating in a diplomatic dispute with Mahan.

“In 38 CE, Hogong was sent to Mahan to pay respects. The King of Mahan rebuked Hogong, saying, ‘*Jinhan and Byeonhan are our vassals, yet in recent years they have not sent tribute. How can this be the proper etiquette for serving a great state?*’ [Hogong] replied, ‘*...Thus, from the Jinhan refugees to the Byeonhan people, the Lelang people, and even the Wa, there is no one who does not fear [Silla].*’...As for this person Hogong, his clan and surname are unknown. Originally, he was a Wa man, but as he first crossed the sea wearing a gourd at his waist, he was called Hogong (‘Gourd Duke’).”

In the *Samguk Sagi*, “*Silla Annals*,” under the entry for Namhae Chachaung, it is recorded that in the year 14 CE, the Lelang Wa raided the coastal villages with over one hundred warships. These “Lelang Wa” can be identified as the Wa living in the sea near Lelang, as mentioned in the *Book of Han*, “*Treatise on Geography*.”

“In the 11th year (14 CE), the Wa sent over one hundred warships to plunder the coastal households. In response, strong warriors from the Six Bu were dispatched to repel them. Lelang, believing our interior to be unguarded, urgently launched an attack on Geumseong (Gold Fortress).”

Silla must have been situated close to the eastern vicinity of Lelang State. The records in the *Silla Annals* align closely with those in the *Twenty-Five Histories* of China.

Meanwhile, accounts related to the Dongyi Wa also appear in the *Dongyi Zhuan* (*Biographies of the Eastern Barbarians*) sections of the *Twenty-Five Histories* of China. Fan Ye of the *Hou Hanshu* includes the Wa of this period among the Dongyi, alongside the Yei, Maek, and Han.

In addition, *Sanguozhi*, in the section on the Han dynasty, states that Gongsun Kang established Daifang Commandery in the wasteland south of Dunyou County in Lelang Commandery. At that time, the term *Wa* referred to the *Dongyi Wa*

² In the *Shangshu* (*Book of Documents*), the chapter “*Yao Dian*” records that Emperor Yao instructed Xizhong to settle in Yanggok, the land of the Wu'i people, which was later incorporated into Gojoseon. The *epitaph of Buyeo Yung*, crown prince of Baekje's last king, likewise states that Mahan-Baekje was originally founded in Yanggok. Taken together, these records suggest a historical continuity in which the Wu'i-founded Gojoseon evolved into the later Mahan-Baekje kingdom.

peoples scattered across the Bohai Gulf region.

The *Samguk Sagi* contains numerous entries related to the Wa. Recent research has revealed that the Wa in the *Samguk Sagi* were, primarily located within the Korean Peninsula. They frequently crossed into Silla on foot and, together with Baekje, even attacked Goguryeo. In the late 4th to early 5th centuries, the ability to mobilize hundreds of ships or to repeatedly encircle Silla implies that they must have been a force based within the peninsula. At that time, the Wa of the Japanese archipelago were relatively less advanced in shipbuilding technology and iron weapon production.

This indicates that the Dongyi Wa, who had migrated from China and settled in the southwestern part of the Korean Peninsula, were actively expanding their territory, bringing them into ongoing conflict with Gaya and Silla.

The conflict between the Dongyi Wa and the Silla–Gaya alliance eventually escalated into a large-scale war. According to the combined records of the *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa*, the Gaya confederation known as the Posang Eight States, allied with Bora-guk—identified with Mahan’s Balla-guk in present-day Naju—waged two major wars: first in 209 CE against Ara Gaya and Silla, and then in 212 CE against Geumgwan Gaya in Gimhae and Silla.

The eight polities that participated in the Posang Eight States War can be identified along with their approximate modern locations as follows: Bora-guk (Naju), Gosapo-guk (spanning from Hadong to Gonyang), Gunmi-guk (Jinju and parts of Sacheon, including Gonyang), Samul-guk (Samcheonpo, Sacheon), Goja-guk (Goseong and Tongyeong), Golpo-guk (Masan and the Changwon region), Chilpo-guk (Chilwon and Hoewon-gu, Changwon), Dokro-guk (centered in Dongnae, Busan, and extending toward Geoje). (Park, 2022: 424).

In the *Samguk Sagi*, “*Silla Annals*” during the reign of King Na-hae, the following entries appear:

“6th year of Na-hae Isageum’s reign (201 CE), spring, 2nd lunar month: The state of Gaya proposed forming a peace alliance with Silla.

13th year (208 CE), spring, 2nd lunar month: The king conducted an inspection tour of the western counties and returned after ten days.

14th year (209 CE), autumn, 7th lunar month: When the Posang Eight States plotted an invasion of Gara, the prince of Gara came to Silla to request military assistance. King Na-hae dispatched Crown Prince Uro and the general I-eum to lead troops drawn from Silla’s six military divisions. The Silla forces defeated the invading coalition, killing the generals of the eight states and rescuing 6,000 captives who had been taken.

17th year (212 CE), spring, 3rd lunar month: Gaya sent its prince to be held as a hostage.”

The Posang Eight States War was a massive conflict that shook the entire southern coast of the Korean Peninsula. The record that Silla rescued as many as 6,000 captives suggests that tens of thousands of troops were mobilized in total.

However, the war record in *the Silla Annals* is vague in detailing military achievements. This suggests that the reason Mul Gyeja, the general of Silla, was not officially recognized for his achievements was likely because Silla failed to rescue Ara Gaya, reclaiming only a portion of the captives.

An objective account of the outcome of the Posang Eight States War appears in the *Sanguozhi*, compiled around 280 CE. According to this record, the twelve tribal states of Byeonjin came under the authority of the Jin King of Mahan after the war. In other words, Bora-guk of the Jin King of Mahan—which had led the Posang Eight States alliance—emerged victorious.

“The Jin King rules from the Yuezhi-guk. The Shinji was sometimes given additional honorary titles such as Sinun-gyeonji-bo, Anya-chukji, Bunshin-li-a, and Burae-guya-jinji-ryeom. Their official positions include Weisolsun, Eupgun, Guiui-hu, Jungnangjang, Dowi, and Baekjang.”

This record suggests that by the mid-3rd century, the Byeonjin states—including Anya (Ara Gaya), Burae-Guya³ (Geumgwan Gaya), and other tribal polities—had been integrated into a centralized political structure under the Jin royal system of Mahan. The Han section of the *Sanguozhi* clearly states that “twelve of the twenty-four states of Byeonhan and Jinhan were subordinate to the Jin King,” making the outcome of the war unmistakably clear. The disappearance of Gaya from the *Samguk Sagi* following its defeat in 212 further underscores this regional realignment and the consolidation of power by the Mahan Jin King in the southern Korean Peninsula.

In the *Nihon Shoki*, the account of Empress Jingū includes a record of the conquest of the Seven Kara Kingdoms, which is interpreted as referring to the Posang Eight States War. This is because the geographical focus is the Gaya region, and the time period corresponds to the 3rd century. Thereafter, exchanges between the Bora (Balla) forces and the Japanese

³ Here, “Burae” is interpreted as referring to Buyeo, suggesting that Geumgwan Gaya in present-day Gimhae may have undergone a change not only in political status but also in its very name (Jeong, 2003).

archipelago appear to have continued, accompanied by a steady movement of people and cultural goods to the archipelago.

The Dongyi Wa (Dokro-guk), which bordered Silla, allied with Naju's Mahan Balla-guk⁴ and, after securing victory in the Posang Eight States War, founded Imna-guk in Haman. Through these Dongyi Wa, the forces of the Jin King from Mahan Yuezhi-guk, based in Bannam, Naju, continued their advance into the Japanese archipelago. It appears that, via the newly founded Baekje kingdom in the Geum River basin, they bestowed the Seven-Branched Sword upon Yamato in Himiko's country, effectively making the Yamato polity a vassal state.

In the *Sanguozhi* and *Hou Hanshu*, describing mid-3rd century Han in the post-Posang War period, it states that Mahan bordered Wa to the south, and that the southern Byeonhan also shared a border with Wa.

According to the Han section of *Sanguozhi*, "(In Jinhan) because it is close to Wa, both men and women sometimes tattoo their bodies," and it also records that "among the states of Byeonjin, Dokro-guk borders Wa." Since state of Dokro is identified with the Donglai area of Busan, this indicates that Wa people were also living in the Busan region.⁵

The Dokro State, based in Donglai, Busan, served as a stronghold for the tattooed and short-haired Wa, who frequently crossed the border to attack Silla. Dokro (pronounced "Duluo" in modern Chinese pinyin) means "the country of the Lu clan." Like the Makro State of Mak Hobol, the founder of the Murong Xianbei, it was a state primarily led by the Lu clan. During the 3rd to 5th centuries AD, members of the Lu clan formed a core component of the Murong Xianbei, who were known as the "Gods of War."

The Dokro-guk faction engaged in coastal trade, wore their hair short, and tattooed bodies, hence referred to as Wa by the Silla. They moved freely between Lelang, Daifang, the Japanese archipelago and even the Western Regions. The Yuezhi forces, centered on the Lu clan of Dokro-guk pressed Silla without respite. This confederation united the Buyeo-origin Park and the Xianbei-origin Lu. Busan, tied to the Park lineage, and Dongnae, linked to the Lu clan, are recognized as their ancestral homelands. The Dokro-guk faction ranked among the three great Dongyi powers, holding sway from the Yeongsan and Han Rivers to Shandong, Hebei, Liaoning, and Jiangsu.

In this regard, it has become increasingly common among Korean scholars to acknowledge the existence of a group referred to as "Wa" within the Korean Peninsula. Notably, in May 1998, Professor Seol Seong-gyeong's research team at the Institute of Korean Studies, Yonsei University, held an academic conference titled "*Resolving the Source of Korea-Japan Historical Conflicts: Focusing on the Possibility of the Existence of Wa within the Korean Peninsula*." The team asserted that the Wa frequently mentioned in the *Gwanggaeto Stele*, the *Samguk Sagi*, and other historical texts were a powerful force active from the late 2nd century BCE to around the 5th century CE, centered in the Naju region of the Yeongsan River basin in Jeolla-do, and extending into parts of present-day Jeonnam, Jeonbuk, and Gyeongnam in southern Korea, before being expelled to the Japanese archipelago (Yonhap News, May 27, 1998).

Records concerning the Wa of the Korean Peninsula are preserved in even greater detail on the *Gwanggaeto Stele*. The 396 CE campaign of Gwanggaeto the Great to conquer the Korean Peninsula can be described as a war aimed at subjugating Janguk or Wa, which was the power behind Baekjan.

"Baekjan and Silla had originally been subject peoples, offering tribute since ancient times. However, in the Sinmyo year, Wa crossed the sea and attacked Baekjan, □□, and Silla, seeking to make them its subjects. Thus, in the sixth year, the year of Byeongshin, the king personally led the naval forces to launch a punitive expedition to eradicate the Zan State. The army advanced to Keju, capturing eighteen fortresses."

This passage follows a clear cause-and-effect logic: when Wa attempted to subjugate Baekjan and Silla, King Gwanggaeto used this as a pretext to mobilize his forces and deliver retribution. In this context, both the Zan State and Wa can be understood as referring to Mahan, then a confederation of fifty-five states.

To interpret the record more accurately, it is crucial to note that the stele was erected in 414, during King Jangsu's reign. By that time, Buyeo-hwi - the king of Mahan Baekje (the Zan State) in the Geum River basin, later identified as

⁴ The kingdom referred to in ancient Chinese records as Yuezhi-guk is believed to correspond to the local entity known as Balla-guk (also rendered as Bora-guk). The variation in names is attributed to phonetic interpretations, as the Chinese character Bo was at times pronounced similarly to Bal (Choi, 2008). Thus, Bora and Balla may reflect the same original name. This is akin to referring to the United States by its capital "Washington" rather than by its official name. As such, Yuezhi-guk in Chinese sources and Balla-guk in local usage likely denote the same polity.

⁵ Donglai in Busan shares its name with Donglai in Shandong Province, China, clearly indicating that the Lai tribe of the Lu clan from Shandong had migrated to this area. Busan also shares its name with the ancient toponym Busan in Baoding, Hebei, suggesting ancestral ties of the Park lineage.

Emperor Ōjin - had already fled to the archipelago and ascended as the king of Wa-Baekje. This explains why the inscription uses the phrase “crossed the sea and attacked.” In fact, as early as 391, the Zan State in the Geum River basin had deposed King Jinsa, seized control of Baekjan in the Han River basin, and extended its power over much of Silla and Gaya.

The *Gwanggaeto Stele* records that up until 396 CE, surnames such as No, Mo, Mak, Lu, and Du appear frequently. These groups had, since ancient times, been clans integrated with the Buyeo people and were a major force of the Great Yuezhi who migrated from the Shandong region to the Korean Peninsula.

The stele records that between 392 and 396 CE, the king captured a total of 58 fortresses. Among them are numerous fortresses identifiable as belonging to the Lu lineage. The Lu-related fortresses listed on the stele include: Gumuloseong, Gakmuloseong, Gakmiseong, Muloseong, Misaseong, Gumoseong, Gosuyaraseong, Gomoyaraseong, Mak□□seong, □Iyaraseong, Dunoseong, Numaeseong, Moruseong, Uruseong, Sohoeseong, Yeonruseong, Gomoruseong, Yunnoseong, Gwannoseong, □goroseong, Dunoseong, Mochuseong, Magoseong, Gumoseong, Mosuseong, and Panoseong, totaling 26 fortresses. This demonstrates that ancient Mahan groups often incorporated their clan names into both their state names and fortress names.

The remaining fortresses are identified as belonging to the Buyeo clan of Mahan Baekje. By comparing the names of Mahan states with the fortresses captured by King Gwanggaeto, their locations can be estimated: Gakmiseong (present-day Gyo-ha, Paju), Gumuloseong (Cheongyang, South Chungcheong Province), Mosuseong (Yangju, Gyeonggi Province), Muloseong (Seosan, South Chungcheong Province), Biriseong (Buyeo, South Chungcheong Province), and Misaseong (Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi Province). Since these fortresses were located between northern Gyeonggi and South Chungcheong, it can be inferred that the rest were also situated north and south of the Han River, as well as in the Geum River basin.

In the *Gwanggaeto Stele inscription*, the term “Zan State” refers to the same force as the Wa. King Gwanggaeto’s objective was to root out this Wa. The Wa mentioned here were not the forces in the Japanese archipelago, but rather the Xianbei Lu clan and the Wu’i clan of Mahan Baekje within the Korean Peninsula.

The Lu clans crossed over to the archipelago and established numerous states. Among the various polities recorded in the “*Account of the Wa*” in *Sanguozhi*, at least ten can be identified as Lu clan states: Malro-guk, Bulmi-guk, Lu-guk, Milu-guk, Jeolu-guk, Solu-guk, Hwanosolu-guk, Gwili-guk, Ollu-guk, and Gullu-guk. Furthermore, in the spring of 57 CE, the ruler of Lu-guk of the Wa, who sent an envoy to the mainland, was a member of the Xianbei Lu clan who had entered the archipelago. These records demonstrate that the Murong Xianbei and their allied clans, together with the Buyeo lineage, were deeply involved in the history of the Korean Peninsula and its surrounding regions.

This might be called a “paradox of history.” It was the result of King Gwanggaeto’s conquest of the Korean Peninsula that made the Wa of the archipelago into a powerful force. In fact, the very reason the Dongyi Wa were able to establish such a strong presence on the peninsula can be traced back to Qin Shi Huang’s policy of relocating and resettling border populations.

4. Review of Records Related to the Wa of the Archipelago

The first record of the Wa of the archipelago appears in the *Wei Zhi’s Account of the Wa* in *Sanguozhi*. The figure who attempted to establish relations with China was Himiko, whom the *Nihon Shoki* identifies as Empress Jingū. In the Yayoi period, prior to the Kofun period, the archipelago consisted of around thirty small polities that formed a confederation under the leadership of Himiko, a female shaman.

“Men, whether adults or children, all practice tattooing characters or patterns on the face and tattooing on the body. ... They cultivate rice and ramie, raise silkworms, plant mulberry trees, and engage in weaving, producing fine ramie cloth and silk and fine silk fabrics. ... They habitually burn bones to divine good or bad fortune, first declaring the matter to be divined. Their method is similar to the *linggui* method, examining the cracks formed after burning to determine auspiciousness or ill omen. ... Originally, the country was ruled by men for seventy to eighty years. Later, disturbances broke out in Wa, and for several years the states attacked each other. They then jointly installed a woman as ruler. Her name was Himiko. She practiced sorcery and could bewitch the masses.”

The customs of the Wa in the archipelago show that all men bore tattoos, cultivated rice, and raised silkworms to produce silk—practices identical to those of the Dongyi Wa in the Zhejiang region. Their bone-throwing divination closely resembled the customs of Buyeo. This was no coincidence; rather, it indicates that the Dongyi Wa had already exerted influence over the archipelago.

Archaeological evidence further confirms this connection: the bird-foot-pattern pottery, originally an indigenous type of the Yeongsan River basin in Korea, was later unearthed in Kyushu, Japan, suggesting transmission across the sea rather than local parallel development [Figure 3].



Figure 3. Bird-Foot-Pattern Pottery from Jeonnam, Korea, found in Kyushu, Japan

Source: KBS. (2009).

The first figure in the history of the archipelago to appear in historical records, Himiko, sent envoys to China and was granted the title of “King of Wa friendly to Wei”.

“In the sixth month of the 2nd year of Jingchu (238 CE), during the reign of Emperor Ming of Wei, the Queen of Wa sent the grandee Nashonmi and others to the Daifang Commandery to request permission to proceed to the Son of Heaven and present tribute. The Governor of Daifang, Liu Xia, dispatched an envoy to escort them to the capital.”

However, the above account from the Wei Zhi’s Account of the Wa in the Sanguozhi appears almost identically in the Nihon Shoki under the section on Empress Jingū.

“In the 39th year, the cyclical year was *gimi* [According to the *Wei Zhi*, in the 3rd year of Emperor Ming of Wei’s Jingchu era (June 239), the queen of Wa sent the grandee Nandumi and others, who arrived at the commandery and requested to proceed to the Son of Heaven to offer tribute. The Governor of Daifang Commandery, Deng Ha, dispatched officials to escort them to the capital].”

When comparing the two accounts above, aside from the one-year discrepancy in the date the envoys were sent—listed as the 2nd year of Emperor Ming of Wei’s *Jingchu* era in one and the 3rd year in the other—the content is identical. Based on this entry, the compilers merged the Empress Jingū account with records from Baekje’s ‘Three Histories’ and China’s ‘Twenty-Five Histories.’

Empress Jingū also sent envoys to Silla. In the 20th year of King Adalla Isageum (173), there is a record stating, “In May, Queen Himiko of Wa sent envoys to pay a courtesy visit.” This was possibly for reinforcements in the Wa Civil War, but Silla refused. The Wa Civil War ended in 179, and in that same year, Himiko was enthroned as queen. Therefore, the first year of Empress Jingū’s reign was not 201, but 179.

According to the accounts in the *Nihon Shoki* and the *Sanguozhi*, Empress Jingū (Himiko) was essentially a shaman, delivering divine oracles and serving as a spiritual medium. Her husband was Emperor Chūai, but when he ignored Himiko’s oracle to attack Silla and instead decided to strike Woongseup in the south-central region of Kyushu, she conspired with Munae Sukrye and others to stage a coup and assassinate him.

“In the ninth year of Emperor Chūai’s reign, ... the Emperor suddenly fell ill and died the following day. ... Thereupon, the Empress and the high minister Munae Suknye concealed the Emperor’s death and did not make it known to the realm. ... They ordered four senior ministers to lead the court officials in guarding the palace, while secretly having the Emperor’s body recovered and sent by sea with Munae Suknye to Hyeolmun. ... That year, due to the planned conquest of Silla, the Emperor could not be given a funeral.”

In the *Chronicles of Empress Jingū*, it is recorded that in the very year Emperor Chūai died (178 CE), she, while heavily pregnant, blocked the birth with a stone and crossed the sea to subjugate Silla. However, most of the entries in the *Annals of Empress Jingū* were compiled by Baekje-descended immigrants, who appended the histories of Baekje, Gaya,

and Silla. Consequently, unless one examines the dates of each entry in the edited *Chronicles of Empress Jingū* individually, one could easily mistake her for a figure of the 4th century.

According to the *Sanguozhi*, Empress Jingū, who ascended the throne in 179, died in 247. However, some claim that the already deceased Himiko was resurrected to lead a campaign against the Seven Kingdoms of Gaya in 369. The following entry from the 49th year of the *Chronicles of Empress Jingū* is the very account that numerous Japanese researchers argue, by lowering the date by 120 years, actually took place in 369 CE.

“In the spring, third month of the 49th year, Hwang Jeon-byeol and Nok A-byeol were appointed as generals. ... Soon after, orders were given to Mok Rakeun-ja and Sasa Nogue [their surnames are unknown; however, Mok Rakeun-ja was a general of Baekje] to lead elite troops together with Sabaek Gaero. They then assembled at Taksun and attacked Silla, defeating it, and subdued the seven polities of Bijabal, Namgara, Rokguk, Anra, Dara, Taksun, and Gara. Afterward, the army turned westward and reached Gohaejin, where they slaughtered the southern barbarians of Chimidalye and presented them to Baekje. At that time, the King of Baekje, Chogo, and the royal prince Guisu also led troops to join them. Then, the towns of Biri, Byeokjung, Pomi, Jiban, and Gosa voluntarily surrendered.”

The above account serves as the basis for both the Mimana Japan Headquarters Theory in Japan and the Geunchogo King's Conquest of Mahan Theory in Korea. These claims represent a prime example of historical distortion. Baekje-descended immigrants compiled the *Nihon Shoki* and inserted the ‘Posang Eight States War’—originally recorded in the *Baekje Annals* concerning the Jin King of Mahan—into the *Chronicles of Empress Jingū*. In this case, Empress Jingū is not the actual principal actor of the war.

In any military, ancient or modern, according to the chain of command, Jingū would have had no authority to issue orders to Baekje generals Mok Ra-geunja and Sasa Noke. These two figures belonged to Baekje's Great Eight Clans—the Mok and Sa clans—who were regionally based in Hoejin (Naju) by the Yeongsan River and Iksan by the Geum River, respectively. Therefore, the record stating that Jingū commanded Mok Ra-geunja is clearly a spliced insertion. Moreover, without any evidence, the date of this entry has been arbitrarily reduced by 120 years to fabricate an entirely new historical narrative.

Even within Korea, this same account is interpreted as having taken place in 369, with Empress Jingū replaced in the narrative by King Geunchogo. A representative example is Lee (1959; 1976), who argued that King Geunchogo and his son conquered the Seven Gaya Kingdoms, secured the surrender of the Yeongsan River basin powers, and thus completely took control of the Jeonnam region in 369. Noh (1987) supported the theory of King Geunchogo's conquest of Mahan by linking Chimidaerae to the Sinmiguk mentioned in the *Jin Shu (Book of Jin)*. In that case, let us examine, based on the records of the *Samguk Sagi*, what King Geunchogo was actually doing in the year 369.

“In the 24th year of King Geunchogo's reign (369), in the autumn, ninth month, King Sayu of Goguryeo led 20,000 infantry and cavalry to station at Chiyang, where he ordered his troops to plunder the civilian houses. The king gave the crown prince command of the army, which took a shortcut to Chiyang and launched a surprise attack, defeating them and beheading more than 5,000 enemy soldiers. The seized goods were distributed among the troops. In the winter, eleventh month of the same year, a large-scale military review was held south of the Han River, during which all forces used yellow banners.”

In 369, when he is claimed to have conducted the conquest war against the Seven Gaya Kingdoms, King Geunchogo was actually fighting the Battle of Chiyang against King Gogukwon of Goguryeo, a clash that put the fate of both kingdoms at stake. If history is more than just parsing classical Chinese texts, one must explain how King Geunchogo, while operating near Pyeongyang, could have simultaneously waged a major campaign on another front. Even King Gwanggaeto, when confronted with two fronts, had to break off an Imna campaign and wheel back to strike Later Yan. Suematsu Yasukazu's Mimana theory rests on the thin claim that the archipelago lacked such capacity during the Jingū era and so transfers the story to Ōjin's reign; Korean academia, in effect, accommodated that move. Accordingly, the “Year 49” entry under Empress Jingū must be dated precisely and subjected to rigorous cross-checking against Korean, Chinese, and Japanese sources.

Another evidence used for the Imna Japan Headquarters Theory is the *Chiljido* (the Seven-Branched Sword). According to the *Nihon Shoki*, in the entry for the 52nd year of Empress Jingū, Gujeo of Baekje and others accompanied Chikuma Nagahiko and presented various precious treasures, including one *Chiljido* and one Seven-Child Mirror. Japanese historians claim that the *Chiljido* was a tribute offered by the King of Baekje to Empress Jingū, his overlord. If so, the inscription on the *Chiljido* must be examined closely.

“On the sixteenth day of the fifth month in the fourth year of Taihe (230 AD), at midday, *Chiljido* was forged from iron refined a hundred times. This sword can repel a hundred armies; it is fitting to present it to the lord. Such a

sword had never before existed; thus, the Crown Prince of Baekje, Gi Saengseongeum, made it for the King of Wa, so that its significance might be passed down to later generations.”

The inscription on *Chiljido* explicitly designates the King of Wa as a “Marquis King,” a rank subordinate to the King of Baekje, and indicates that the sword was an official state gift personally produced by the Crown Prince of Baekje. In ancient diplomatic practice, weapons such as swords were typically bestowed by a dominant state upon a dependent polity. Thus, the inscription supports the view that Baekje treated Wa as a lower-ranking ally, using this diplomatic gift to assert its military authority and superiority. Accordingly, the Yamato polity under Himiko appears to have functioned as a vassal state within Baekje’s sphere of influence, sustained by the patronage of the Jin King of Mahan.

The *Nihon Shoki*’s account of Empress Jingū contains multiple chronological manipulations. A striking example can be found in the entries for years 64, 65, and 66. As shown in [Table 1], the entries for years 64 and 65 are Baekje-related records entirely unrelated to the Japanese archipelago, inserted to portray Empress Jingū as a fourth-century figure. When reduced by two sexagenary cycles, the dates roughly align with actual events. On this basis, the practice of interpreting the *Jingū-ki* by lowering its chronology by 120 years became established.

Table 1. Discrepancies between Nihon Shoki Regnal Years of Empress Jingū and Actual Historical Dates

Empress Jingū Regnal Year (<i>Nihon Shoki</i>)	Event in Text	Chronology of the <i>Nihon Shoki</i>	Actual Year from External Sources	Gap
Year 9 (Chūai)	Departing from Wani-no-tsu to invade Silla, King Pasa Isageum sent Misaheun as a hostage	200	Pasa’s reign((80–112), Misaheun was taken to Wa in 402 (<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	Not measurable
Year 5	The Silla envoy Momarijilji rescued Misaheun	205	Misahun’s escape, 418 (<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	+213 years
Year 47	Envoys sent by the King of Baekje; Empress Jingū and the Crown Prince rejoiced	247	Death of Empress Jingū (<i>Sanguozhi</i>)	0
Year 49	Conquest of the Seven Gaya States	249	Posang Eight States War, 212 (<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	-37 years
Year 55	Death of King Chogo of Baekje	255	Death of King Chogo, 214 (<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	-41 years
Year 56	Prince Guisu ascends the Baekje throne	256	Guisu enthroned as king, 214 (<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	-42 years
Year 64	Death of King Guisu of Baekje; enthronement of King Chimnyu	264	384(<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	+120 years
Year 65	Death of King Chimnyu; usurpation by Jin-sa	265	385(<i>Samguk Sagi</i>)	+120 years
Year 66	Jin <i>Taichu</i> 2nd year, 10th month: Queen of Wa sends envoys	266	266(<i>Book of Jin</i>)	0
Year 69	Death of Empress Jingū at age 100	269	247(<i>Sanguozhi</i>)	-22 years

However, as shown in [Table 1], the chronological framework of the *Jingū-ki* reveals no internal consistency. Moreover, according to the *Book of Jin*, in the case of the entry for Year 66, the *Jin Records of Daily Life* notes that the Queen of Wa who sent tribute to Jin in 266 was not Himiko, but her niece Iyo.

In other words, the entry for Year 64 and Year 65 contains fourth-century Baekje records, while the entry for Year 69 comes from the third-century records of the Chinese *Twenty-Five Histories*. By placing accounts from entirely different eras in direct succession, we can once again confirm that the compilers of the *Jingū-ki* pieced together materials from disparate sources. Furthermore, since Queen Himiko died in 247, the Year 69 entry of the *Jingū-ki* corresponds to a date lowered by 22 years.

After experiencing a 120-year dynastic gap, the Wa of the Japanese archipelago entered a new phase when King Ōjin of Geumgang Baekje, having been defeated by King Gwanggaeto, migrated to the archipelago along with a large population. Archaeological evidence provides additional support for large-scale movements: jar-coffin stone-cist tombs closely matching those excavated at Bokam-ri (Naju) have also been reported at Shinmachi (Kyushu). While not definitive proof of direct derivation, these close morphological and constructional parallels are consistent with cultural transmission—potentially via migrant groups or artisan transfer—from the Yeongsan River basin to parts of Japan [Figure 4].



Figure 4. Jar-Coffin Stone-Cist Tombs: Similar Forms—Japan (left: Shinmachi, Kyushu) and Korea (right: Bokam-ri, Naju)

Source: KBS. (2009).

The influx of such a powerful force from the Korean Peninsula rapidly accelerated the formation of an ancient state in the Japanese islands. Moreover, with the migration of over 700,000 people from 137 districts, the archipelago gained the opportunity to catch up with the Korean Peninsula (as recorded in the *Nihon Shoki, Ojin Chronicle*). By the Asuka period, the Japanese archipelago began to develop at a remarkable pace.

Notably, gilt-bronze shoes decorated with fish patterns were unearthed from the Fukinoki Tumulus in Nara, dating to the late 6th century, while an earlier example—discovered a century before in the late 5th century Bokam-ri tomb of Naju—demonstrates clear evidence that the Japanese archipelago was under the cultural influence of the Yeongsan River basin [Figure 5].



Figure 5. Gilt-Bronze Shoes Decorated with Fish Patterns

Source: KBS (2009).



Figure 6. mtDNA Genetic Distance Map

Source: KBS. (2009).

In Yeongdong-ri, Naju, within the Yeongsan River basin, skeletal remains of 23 individuals were excavated. As shown in [Figure 6], mtDNA analysis revealed that their genetic profiles closely matched those of modern Japanese populations, while showing little affinity with modern Koreans or groups associated with Silla. This finding underscores the deep historical connections between the Yeongsan River basin population and the Japanese archipelago.

Centuries later, as the imperial system became firmly established, the people of the Japanese archipelago began to distance themselves from their earlier identity as ‘Wa.’ According to the *Xin Tang shu* (*New Book of Tang*), Japanese section, “In the first year of Xianheng (670), envoys from Wa who had gone to the Tang dynasty to congratulate on the pacification of Goguryeo later became somewhat accustomed to the Chinese language. Disliking the name ‘Wa,’ they changed their name to ‘Japan.’ The envoys themselves stated that this was because their country was close to where the sun rises.”

5. Conclusion: The Identity of Wa

The Wa, long regarded as the ancestors of the Japanese people, did not originate in the Japanese archipelago. Rather, the term referred to maritime Dongyi groups whose earliest homeland lay in what is now Zhejiang Province, China. Their migration and expansion accelerated after the collapse of states such as Wu and Yue, spreading into the Bohai Gulf and the Korean Peninsula.

A comparative analysis of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese sources shows that the Wa were not a single Japanese nation but a network of polities rooted in China’s eastern seaboard and southern Korea. During Qin Shi Huang’s unification, many migrated to the Korean Peninsula and later to Japan, where they formed early states that came under Baekje’s influence. Traces of their presence remain in both historical records and place names—including Wu, Heishan (Heuksan/Kuroyama), Yanggok, and other coastal settlements—demonstrating a distinct pattern of migration and geographic continuity.

The *Samguk Sagi* contains numerous references to Wa, yet their origins have rarely been investigated beyond their identification with Imna, located in present-day Gyeongnam. This generalization has contributed to the mistaken conflation of Wa with an early Japanese nation. However, when cross-referenced with Chinese histories and the *Nihon Shoki*, it becomes clear that Wa in the 2nd to 4th centuries CE denoted neither a unified ethnic identity nor the entire Japanese archipelago, but rather a set of vassal or allied polities under Baekje’s influence, operating across southern Korea and parts of Japan.

The Seven-Branches Sword inscription confirms this relationship, describing the King of Wa as a marquis subordinate to Baekje. In East Asian diplomacy, such gifts signified vassalage and allegiance, underscoring Baekje’s dominance. Nevertheless, later Japanese narratives, relying on selective readings of the *Nihon Shoki* and the *Gwanggaeto Stele*, retroactively created the Mimana Japan Headquarters myth to assert early Japanese rule over Korea.

The Posang Eight States War, often misattributed to Empress Jingū or King Geunchogo, further illustrates these distortions. The *Samguk Sagi* clearly records that in 369 CE, Geunchogo was engaged in battle with Goguryeo’s king Gogugwon at Chiyang, making the simultaneous conquest of Gaya implausible. The *Nihon Shoki*’s chronology manipulates events to fill a dynastic gap, and thus its account collapses under scrutiny when compared against independent Korean and Chinese sources.

The migration of elites and commoners from Baekje to the Japanese archipelago in the late 4th to early 5th centuries—following the defeat of King Ōjin by Goguryeo’s King Gwanggaeto—accelerated the emergence of the early Wa state in Japan. With the consolidation of imperial rule during the Asuka period, the term Wa was eventually abandoned in 670 CE and replaced by Nihon (Japan), reflecting a desire to shed Wa’s vassal connotation and claim independent national identity.

In conclusion, the Wa should not be viewed as an ancient Japanese nation, but as a dynamic political formation born from Dongyi maritime migrations, conquest, and vassalage. Their identity was forged across a trans-regional landscape connecting eastern China, southern Korea, and the Japanese islands. Only through a multi-pronged methodology—including comparative textual analysis, migration pattern tracing, place-name studies, and critical reassessment of key conflicts like the Posang War—can the true historical character of Wa be accurately reconstructed. Misidentifying Wa as a proto-Japanese nation reflects colonial-era distortions rather than the region’s complex intercultural history.

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