Parhae’s War with Tang China: Background and Significance

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TWO PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING PARHAE’S ATTACK ON DENGZHOU

Parhae’s attack on Dengzhou in 732 was a rare instance in Korean history in which a Korean state struck first. Generally this attack has been understood as a response by Parhae to a crisis that arose when the Hūksu Malgal aligned themselves with the Tang out of concern about Parhae’s expansionism. But the Parhae of that time had received letters of investiture from the Tang and it was not an easy thing for Parhae, which was militarily far weaker than the Tang, to undertake such an attack. Furthermore, the Tang demanded that Silla participate in the war and in return granted recognition of Silla’s control of the territory south of the Taedong River. Since both the Hūksu Malgal and Silla were involved, it is necessary to look at this attack on Dengzhou from the larger perspective of East Asian international relations.

On one hand, right before Parhae launched its attack, it and the Tang were at odds over the issue of the punishment of Tae Munye, the younger brother of Parhae’s King Mu (r. 719–737). Tae Munye opposed King Mu’s plan to subjugate the Hūksu Malgal and sought refuge in the Tang. If we keep in mind that Parhae had not yet fully established its system of rule at this time, we can suppose that the reasons why Tae Munye went into exile had to do not only with King Mu’s foreign policy but also with internal political issues. That is because throughout history many
countries have sought to overcome internal problems through external wars.

**THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN TANG AND PARHAE**

After the fall of Koguryo, large numbers of Koguryo refugees were forcibly relocated into the interior areas of the Tang. Some of them were living in Yingzhou (modern Chaoyang in Liaoning Province) together with Malgal who had been under Koguryo control. Yingzhou was a center of Tang power in the northeast where significant numbers of Qidan were also residing. The Tang was using various ethnic groups as dependencies that were settled in groups but kept separated so they could not attain political unity. These groups were under the control of officials dispatched by the Tang.

In the fifth month of 696, the Qidan, under the leadership of Li Jinzhong and Son Wanying, revolted against the harsh rule of the Tang. This was the outbreak of the so-called Li Jinzhong rebellion. Li and his forces quickly occupied Yingzhou and extended their forces as far as the Hebei region. The Tang, unable to put down Li’s rebellion on its own, turned to the Tujue for assistance. Although the rebellion largely came to an end with the death of Son Wanying in 697, it continued to reverberate throughout the region until 700. This meant the effective loss of control by the Tang over the peoples of the northeastern region. In the midst of this, Koguryo and Malgal remnants living in the Yingzhou area gathered their forces under the leadership of Tae Choyong (r. 698–719) and moved to the Liaodong area. In 698 Tae Choyong was able defeat Tang forces sent to subjugate him at Tianmen Pass. At the same time, the Tang’s Andong Protectorate General was downgraded to the Andong Protectorate with charge only over the Liaodong region.

After the victory at Tianmen Pass, Tae Choyong moved east and established a kingdom at Tongmosan, titling himself the king of the country of Chin. This tells us that Tae initially called his kingdom Chin. The establishment of relations between Chin and the Tang came in 713 when the Tang gave Tae Choyong letters of investiture and the title “King of Parhae Commandery.” The Tang did not call Tae’s kingdom Chin; rather the Tang first referred to it as the Parhae Malgal (Bohai Mohe) before later shortening the name to Parhae. Of course, it was probably some time later before Tae Choyong and his descendents started to use the name Parhae. Thus we should probably use the name Chin for Tae’s kingdom at least up until the time he died in 713, but this chapter will use Parhae throughout to avoid confusion.

The Tang still desired to subjugate Parhae even after its defeat at Tianmen Pass, but was unable to do so because the Qidan had attached themselves to the Tujue, thereby cutting off the route.