RECENTLY A TELEVISION drama called “Haesin” (Sea God) became quite popular. This drama is based on the activities of Chang Pogo (Jang Bogo), the “King of the Seas” who based himself in what is now Wan Island (Wando) in South Cholla (Jeolla) Province where he controlled the triangular trade among the Tang, Korea, and Japan. But very few people in Korea know of the maritime activities and trade conducted by Parhae at the same time, even though Parhae was the Northern Kingdom of Korea’s Northern and Southern Kingdoms period. Chang Pogo’s activities were largely confined to China’s Shandong Peninsula, Japan’s Kyushu Island, and the southwestern coast of Korea. In other words he was active in the Yellow Sea and the Southern Sea (the waters between Korea and Japan). Parhae, by contrast, was active not only in the Yellow Sea but also in the Bay of Bohai and even in the East Sea thus covering almost all the ocean waters of Northeast Asia, but there is almost no one who is aware of that fact. Why and how did Parhae develop such an active maritime role?

THE TANG’S ECONOMIC SYSTEM AND TRIBUTARY TRADE

Before inquiring into Parhae’s maritime activities, we must first look into the trade situation of all of East Asia. Trade in East Asia was closely linked with the Tang’s economic system. That was because the Tang was the most advanced country and the largest importer of the time. The Silk Road that had linked East and West since the
dawn of history reached its greatest glory in the later Tang era. This was based, more than anything else, on the economic prosperity of the Tang.

To begin with, the Tang era saw an increase in agricultural productivity. More land was brought under cultivation through reclamation projects, irrigation works were expanded, and the introduction of new crops came together to enhance agricultural productivity. The resultant greater economic vitality in the villages led to the production of local special products and agricultural surpluses which provided the base for the development of commerce. The growth of commerce in turn brought a series of economic changes, including the growth of cities. These changes soon made it evident that the old land-based Silk Road was no longer able to meet the growing demand for products from the West. A revolutionary transformation known as the maritime Silk Road was developed in order to meet the demand.

Growth in agricultural productivity began with improvements in farming implements. The use of animal traction and the appearance of smaller implements enabled deep plowing. This was accompanied by the development of irrigation facilities to greatly increase productivity. A more sophisticated system of crop rotation, along with improved fertilizers and planting methods made double cropping possible. Furthermore, there was diversification in crop types and the propagation of new varieties, especially rice, meant even greater production.

Such growth in agricultural productivity necessarily brought social changes. One important aspect was the commodification of excess agricultural production. At the same time, the appearance of secondary occupations also gave greater vitality to the rural economy and led to the rise of commerce. There was also the investment of indirect social capital in facilities for the vitalization of the economy, including improvements in the system of postal stations and canals. A uniform currency was established with the minting of the Kaiyuan tongbao coin, and uniform standards of weights and measures were put in place. The land tax-local tribute-corvee tax system also incorporated the peasants into the distributive economy. Furthermore there was the rise of professional merchants as an important social group and wealthy merchants were even able to enter the bureaucracy. That marked a major change in Chinese society.

The development of commerce was accompanied by urbanization. The old cities, which had been administrative and political centers where officials and landlords resided gradually transformed into centers of commercial activity. With the expansion of a distributive economy, regional cities became bases for the collection and distribution of agricultural products and for the diffusion of commodities from remote areas into surrounding farming villages.

The growth of domestic productivity in China formed the backdrop for the expansion of international trade during the Tang era. Much of