

Claiming the Lineage of Northeast Asian Civilization: The Discovery of Hongshan and the “Hongshan Turn” in Popular Korean Pseudohistory

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Hongshan is the name of a material culture straddling Inner Mongolia and the Liaoning provinces—the Liaoxi region—China, dating ca. 4500–3000 BCE. Known for enigmatically carved jades, Hongshan rose to popular prominence in the 1980s following the discovery of two significant ritual sites. Since then, some Chinese archaeologists have proposed Liaoxi as a source of either regional or greater Central Plain civilization. Heralding public knowledge in South Korea, meanwhile, Korean scholars active on the “inner fringe” of professional scholarship sought to contest Hongshan’s “Chinese” identification, instead asserting it to be the origin of a civilization directly ancestral to the early polities of Korean history. Leading the popular discourse, they incorporated Hongshan into preexisting paradigms asserting continental origins of the Korean people and connected to aggrandizing schemes of Old Chosŏn (trad. 2333–108 BCE). From the latter half of the 2000s and against the context of national-level history disputes with China, a second generation of inner-fringe and unequivocal pseudohistorians has promoted Hongshan, establishing it as a seemingly core topic of “Korean” prehistory. Their emergence signals the “Hongshan turn” in Korean pseudohistory, a turn that has been further bolstered through Hongshan’s incorporation into South Korean new religions. This article narrates the recent trajectory of the Hongshan discourse, critically analyzing its functions and framing.

Keywords: Hongshan, pseudohistory, archaeology, origins discourse, diachronic genealogy

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