

# Incongruity and Authenticity in the Korean Psyche: Reflections on the Paleolithic Site of Jeongok-ri

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## *Abstract*

The paleolithic site of Jeongok-ri in the Imjin-Hantang River Basin is a key paleolithic site in East Asia, and is arguably the most important within Korea. Discovery there of an Acheulean axe led to the Movius Line being challenged, though recent research suggests that in situ technological evolution was inhibited in East Asia due to the constraints of relatively smaller effective population sizes. Paleolithic artifacts do however suggest a culture of considerable authenticity; these must have been a hardy people who thrived on adversity.

The site is currently being developed as an educational and recreational resort. Some development reconnects the present with the prehistoric past, and is authentic: this includes recreations of paleolithic shelters, statues of prehistoric animals, and of prehistoric people engaged in typical paleolithic pursuits, such as hunting and fishing, collecting, preparing, and cooking food.

But other development is striking in its incongruity. One encounters large sculptures of a bear riding a scooter, a stainless steel duck, a metal cubist assemblage on a cart, hard sheet iron with cut-outs of cartoon children; and a hi-tech museum nearing completion. Shelters provide some sense of paleolithic dwelling, but have been set in a depression, and face north, so that their grassed earthen floors are often wet. Little sense is given of how they might have been used during the day, or the year. Incongruity culminates in a schizophrenic encounter with a highly reflective dragon-like museum, emerging from and lying uneasily coiled on the ground.

These incongruities suggest a lack of authenticity in the modern world, in response to its past. It contrasts starkly with a realistic presence of authenticity in that past, which still speaks. This loss of authenticity extends beyond such archaeological sites, and, it may be argued, is pervasive of contemporary culture and society.

We examine the site and by extension modern Korea with regard to certain key factors. These include loss of silence; intolerance of solitude; impoverishment of the creative imagination; preoccupation with appearance; pro- versus anti-life (not in relation to abortion); and suggest that this modern loss of authenticity and integrity springs from a perception that places collective society as the fundamental reality. We argue that this is a false perception, and that it lies at the crux of severe environmental problems now emerging.

This perspective may help explain a society that sometimes appears out of control and characterized by self-centeredness; by non-interference even when it is called for; by lack of an independent and critical perspective; and by abhorrence of reaction, and even of action. In consequence, essential feedback mechanisms are over-ridden, and therefore runaway scenarios become inevitable.

In essence, we confront a society that appears preoccupied with power. But Tradition teaches that a preoccupation with power corrupts clear vision, and that lacking an adequate sense of reality, a society is headed for self-destruction. It is therefore apposite to face certain problems that affect Korean society, and to seek to regain an authentic sense of being.

# 1 Introduction

This paper attempts to make sense of a culture shock that becomes if anything more - not less - pronounced after author Meurant's decade of residence, work, and exploration in Korea. It addresses what contemporary Korean society and its culture is about, and where it is going, while offering the perspective of an involuntary outsider. It focuses on questions of authenticity that may well seem foreign to contemporary society, but whose absence augurs poorly for a sustainable, ecologically responsible, and even feasible future.

## 2 Jeongok-ri Paleolithic Site

### 2.1 The Site

In 1978, Early Paleolithic hand-axes were discovered in the Imjin/Hantan River Basin (IHRB), near the town of Jeongok-ri (aka Chongokni). The IHRB - much of which is situated in the DMZ - is located in the southwestern region of the Chugaryong Rift Valley, running from Seoul in the west to Wonsan on the east coast. This rift developed through three stages of tectonic activity, and effectively divides the Korean Peninsula. The site of Jeongok-ri is situated on a basalt plateau that formed during the Middle Pleistocene, the basalt originating from a small volcano in the Cheolwon and Pyounggang areas of North Korea. There are mountains to the east and flat plains and hills to the west; the Hantan River now flows between the basalt plateau and the low-lying mountains, though its path is presumed to have fluctuated throughout the Pleistocene. The site has been surveyed and excavated on various occasions, and by 2006 had yielded over 5,000 tools, flake implements, and debitage [1], which suggest a hominin occupation between 350-300 kya.

The discovery of biface assemblages at Jeongok-ri, and at other IHRB sites of Kimpari, Chuwoli and Kawoli, challenged the validity of the Movius Line *sensu stricto*. The ability to produce bifacially worked

stone tools is considered indicative of a major cognitive breakthrough associated with more advanced behavioral and cultural patterning, but - in the absence of refined bifaces - had until then been presumed to be absent east of the Indian subcontinent. However, given the dominance in East Asia of Mode 1 type technologies and the absence of similar sites in wider areas, their discovery suggested that the Movius Line *sensu lato* was still supportable.

Recently, Lycett and Norton have argued that paleolithic technological evolution is better understood by linking cultural transmission to demographic factors of population size, density, and social interconnectedness [2]. It is thought that during much of the Pleistocene, biogeographical, topographical and dispersal factors resulted in relatively lower effective population sizes in East Asian hominins; and thus the Movius Line *sensu lato* represents the crossing of a demographic threshold, so that these geographically and temporally sporadic occurrences of bifacial technology were the product of short-lived instances of technological convergence.

### 2.2 Problems of Preservation

Bae Ki-Dong argues that the paleolithic site of Jeongok-ri provides an exemplar for the protection and utilization of archaeological sites in Korea [3]. Jeongok-ri was designated National Monument #265 after the first excavations in 1979, and is the largest prehistoric site in Korea to be so designated. He argues that it is critical to protect such prehistoric sites from economic development. The annual archaeological festival, and construction of the museum and archaeological park provides a significant means of promoting public awareness and attraction of people to the site. The principle is simple: that the most active use of a site introduces the best solution for its preservation. But this simplicity may be problematic; such mass activity brings with it a loss of authenticity. Is the essential really being preserved?

## 3 Key Factors

An imaginative portal on the highway alerts one to the park. One enters the site from the main entrance to the north, passing between statues of a paleolithic man with sheep/goat, and woman with children. But one's approach to the prehistoric past is then disrupted by cartoon-like characters that suggest this to be an amusement, rather than an archaeological, park.







Groupings of hominins engage in typical activities related to hunting, gathering, food preparation and tool-making. These serve the imagination well, in recreating a sense of what life must have been like. But then one begins to encounter further incongruous elements that unsettle one's concentration and imagination. A torso-less running figure seems quite out of context - from what is it fleeing or to where is it running - and why does it lack a torso? A gently sloping plain rises before one; elements of interest in the landscape take one's attention, but at what price?

Further cartoon-like characters serve to cheapen and devalue the experience, by suggesting the proper end of the facility is no more than to provide yet another variant of childish entertainment.

More incongruity becomes evident: cartoon characters appear to have been stamped from thick flat iron sheet. This heavy metal presence strikes one as the antithesis of the paleolithic mind-set, with its prehistoric predilection for more natural user-friendly materials of stone, bone, antler, wood, and hide.



There are more paleolithic statues; then recreations of paleolithic shelters from various sites, that bring the mind's attention back to an appropriate time and place. But the main grouping of these is set in a depression, and faces almost north; and in consequence their grass floors are remain damp. One cannot imagine that prehistoric man, in this demanding climate, could afford to be so insensitive to orientation, land and sky.









Further disruption occurs as one confronts incongruous sculptural elements: a metallic cart, with cubist assemblage suggesting possibly a modern urban landscape; and a large bear riding a scooter. What relevance do these have, and why are they wheeled? Is this a Fred Flintstone mentality? Then a large stainless steel duck (with duckling on its back) that one can enter (but why?); a dinosaur assemblage of scrap metal and parts - even the dragonflies are metallic. So on this extensive plain there are both authentic reminders of paleolithic life, which complement the site and enable vicarious experience of what that life must have been like; and numerous items of sculpture

which are essentially clutter - they do little but distract one's attention from that prehistoric past, and serve to overwhelm authentic experience with reminders of the incessant whining of an infantile present, attended by tyrannical demands for attention and for immediate satiation that must ever be attended to and indulged.

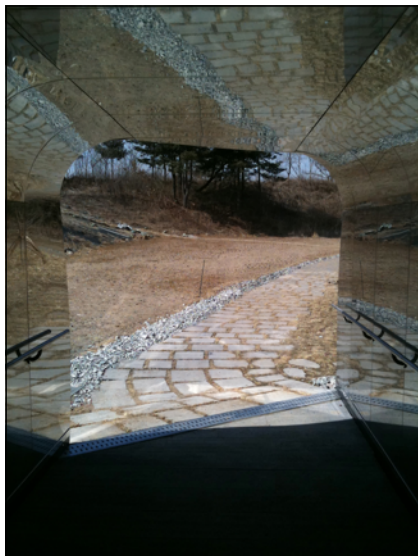
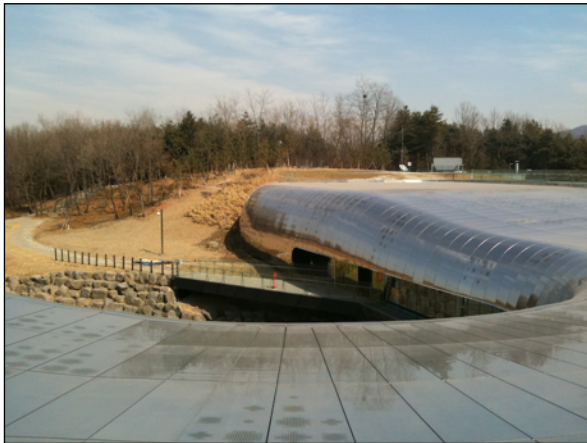
The experience of incongruity culminates when one reaches the skyline of the sloping plain, crosses the ridge, and is then forced into an uneasy confrontation with the new museum: a reflective metallic sinuous extension coiled uneasily in the landscape, provides a shocking antithesis in its high-tech imagery and rejection of traditional architectural elements to all that one might imagine an authentic paleolithic experience to be.











Construction of this new museum is currently being completed. No doubt French architects X-TU designed this building, in part, to elicit shock and draw the attention of drivers on the expressway, at which it will prove most successful: it will attract patrons. But its reflective tubular form bears little relationship to paleolithic architecture, unless it be its antithesis. Is it meant to embody the form of the extended cave, or passage of life through which all must pass? It sits uneasily coiled on the ground, with no discernible front or back, and no proper entrance. Its relationship

to earth and to sky are ill-defined, and inarticulate in contrast with paleolithic shelters, which for all their simplicity are rich in architectural expressiveness; they bed down into the earth, but also respond to the sky. Despite its hi-tech sophistication this museum presents no proper facade, base, walls, or roof. This sophistication comes at a heavy price: Korean women will not appreciate the intensified sun's rays reflected on them as they enter; providing flat roofs that visitors walk upon is fine, but these roofs may leak, and children will likely stray onto and fall off of them.

### 3.1 Loss of Silence

Even in this archaeological park, piped music is provided. It is thought appropriate to accompany one's contemplation of over 300,000 years of intermittent human occupation, with mandatory tracks from the Backstreet Boys. Is there to be no escape from such intrusive noise? It seems that nowhere in developed Korea will silence be allowed. Notwithstanding their thoughtful provision of free WiFi access, cafés in particular seem determined to drown out any possibility of reflection. Is this symptomatic of a fear of the individual mind being permitted to form thoughts for itself? One suspects any such tendency must be ruthlessly - and unconsciously - suppressed. Everything must be driven from without, and from above, so that no independent thought is to be tolerated, and only the institutionally sanctioned is to be permitted (that is to say bland, inefficient, and incompetent). This extends to the colleges and universities, where administrators consider it necessary to dictate to staff, where staff offices are overcrowded, or separated by thin partitions that provide no acoustic privacy: how is concentration possible in such a noisy environment? Classrooms are so crowded that no table and chair can be moved to accommodate group work, as there is simply not enough space. Korea prides itself on its human capital; it claims its people as its main asset; but what an enormous waste of human potential, to so drown their creative individuality in collectivist mindsets!

### 3.2 Intolerance of Solitude

Closely related to this loss of silence, is an apparent fear and distaste of the lone individual. One is patronized for not bearing with one an entourage of fellows, engaged in incessant intercourse, whether it be in the café, the office, the street, or even the public restroom. University staff cafés are prime examples; staff face enormous pressure to constantly attend lunch with their fellows, and are never entitled to just stop and think, to contemplate in solitude. Contemplation in this society is just not an option.

### 3.3 Impoverishment of the Imagination

Even where it appears a measure of provision of space for reflection has been provided, it is tightly regimented, perhaps as a consequence of the high population density and demand. One finds fishing spots around a pond stamped out of the same die, with rows of identical seat cubicles, in an industrial ethic that seeks to standardize relaxation and contemplation.

And, all is incessant motion - notwithstanding President Lee's superb iconic Cheonggyecheon urban renewal project, where on the streets is there space to just sit and to relax? The lack of creative imagination is striking. In the universities, students seem incapable of independent creative thinking [4]. In design, foreign

products are slavishly imitated. In urban development, notwithstanding an admirable entrepreneurial spirit, a highly constrained palette of business initiative results in a bland physical fabric that abolishes place, locality and tradition: as ever more identical restaurants, norebangs, convenience stores, handphone shops, and high-rise apartment complexes proliferate.

### 3.4 Preoccupation with Appearance

Then there is the preoccupation with appearance. One cannot simply just be as one feels. One's appearance is presumed to be the righteous provenance of others, who without hesitation will make sweeping assumptions based on the flimsiest of evidence, and where strangers, acquaintances and even close Korean friends have no problem with commenting on and challenging one's right to bear a several-day stubble, to be of excessive weight or advancing age, to dare to speak native English with a non-American accent, or to prefer to dress casually. Is it any wonder that expat blogs periodically reveal a disgust with and sometimes even express a resentment of such a society?

### 3.5 Pro- versus Anti-Life

Here the terms do not relate to pro- versus anti-abortion. World cultures can be simply classified into those that are essentially pro-life, and those that are anti-life. It is apparent from its art and artifacts, and from its religious philosophy, that traditional Tibetan culture is profoundly pro-life; but it is difficult to regard modern Chinese culture as being anything other than anti-life (notwithstanding the zealotry of its defendants). The needs of the state and its lackeys are elevated ahead of the real needs of its citizens, biodiversity, and environment. Is Korea too, becoming anti-life? The mandates of what is regarded as modern development have overwhelmed traditional society, which has become regarded as a tiresome anachronism that impedes progress. Perhaps this is in part simply the effect of over-crowding: Korea is just too densely populated. Maybe the drop in the birth rate should be a cause for celebration, and not for alarm!

### 3.4 Reflections on the Jeongok-ri Paleolithic site

Particularly in winter, the site is desolate, and speaks of isolation. It seems that the modern development is a reaction to that desolation; it is an attempt to fill up the void - to fill up the silence, with clutter - so that it is no longer empty. The sense of isolation, desolation and solitude is too fearful to deal with, it can not be looked at, nor can it be addressed, and perhaps the infilling is intended as a civilizing act. But at every turn, it is done in such an incongruous manner! Often the elements of development and the way in which the site is treated have no evident relation to the prehistory of the place. Development is provided just to keep the mind occupied, so that it does not have to recognize, or to address the barrenness and the emptiness. So in



that sense it is inauthentic. Why not just leave the site empty, bare, with a few shelters, a few habitations in the prehistoric style, a few recreations, and have people experience the magnificent emptiness and solitude and barrenness and desolation? Is it all that fearful? In fact, the site is quite accommodating of occupation - in the surrounding hills that embrace, and yet there is considerable openness, as the hills do not loom over the site, they are just mid- or back-ground elements that do not occupy the site, but they do furnish the site, they exist as a backdrop, and they are assuring, encouraging. One hill in particular, across the river just by a small bridge, is very clearly a lookout; because of its position it must surely have acted as a lookout in prehistoric times.

As presently organized, the land form of the site is in a sense perverse, in that while it is gently sloping, the slope is to the sunless north. In fact the openness lies to the north, to the great bend in the river, around the lookout summit. This may not just be an accident of the topography. It also speaks of immigrants to the land, who were still - in their minds and hearts - looking back to where they came from. Where they came from must have been from the north, as they must have come down through North Korea. But it is strange, given the otherwise hospitable nature of the site, to so turn one's back on the winter sun.

The elevated openness of the top main space is unusual for Korea. In this country, the landform does not provide a lot of openness, and where there is, it is usually rather compact, not expansive. But at this site there is a lot of room, a lot of empty space, a thin circumference of protection of enclosure, but essentially, in most directions one can see for a long way. And yet one is held. Always there is a sense of the river, even though it cannot be seen from the top, unless one goes right to the crest. It is very present, as a shaper of the landform; one can feel its presence but it is invisible. On the other side of the river there are low hills for an arc of maybe 100 - 120° that would have provided some shelter, though at some distance. But the predominant sense is of openness, barrenness, and desolation. Yet, in the quiet of a beautiful winter's day, with almost no visitors, a more peaceful feeling arises. As one moves towards the center of the space, there is a feeling of being more at ease, and of being settled, a definite feeling of settlement.

The park should surely have the primary intention of enabling in the mind's eye re-creation, experience of what it meant to live there, to dwell there in paleolithic times. So to actually bed down and worry about whether one will die that night from the cold or lack of food, where will the next meal come from perhaps, or perhaps more mundane matters - of whether there is enough water at hand, and similar prosaic matters. What did it actually mean to not have all the overlays of the present, of modern civilization, but to be there, to be part of this 300,000 or even

350,000 years ago? What would the land have been like at that time? And what other people would have been there? Would they have been a tightly-knit group - in part because they needed to be just to survive? Or were there strangers always arriving and leaving? Perhaps it was a nexus for immigrants and travelers to move to other destinations - a wayward camp, perhaps a seasonal camp - much more habitable in the warmer months than in the colder winter? Again silence, baffling silence - the void - a fine sense of lack of distraction, of engagement with the immediate, a sense of relaxation, a growing into the place, an emboldening, perhaps some sense of poetic reverie. But do these feelings and experiences have anything to do with the task at hand, and are they authentic in reliving a paleolithic past? Hominins arrived there, who must have walked hundreds and perhaps thousands of kilometers through barely inhabited or uninhabited country. They presumably would not have used, or even known of, wheels, or reflective metals...

They reached a place where there was good water, some shelter, perhaps an abundance of game, perhaps of plants and herbs and edible material. And did they stay there; why did they not just continue south? Why not just continue to the warmer lands further south? That is an intriguing question; perhaps they were more continental dwellers, than coastal dwellers - was the sea an alien element, notwithstanding the abundance of its shores? And, what remains of them? Do their genes still survive in modern Koreans, as those of paleolithic ancestors do in modern Japanese [5]? (The question is apt, in light of the intermittent occupation of this site over many thousands of years, and the near extinction of humanity just 74,000 years ago from the global effects of a volcanic winter from the Toba super eruption, with its ensuing genetic bottleneck). The sense of the past can be felt there - it comes and goes, it glimmers more than anything, but it does speak - of the solitude and emptiness and the avoidance of distraction - and the peace of the hearth - that there is some stable dwelling enabled there, for whatever reason, whether geomantic, partly topographic, partly micro-climatic. And perhaps hundreds of thousands of years ago they, too, had wonderful festivals, which the 2011 paleolithic festival revives with its welcome entourage of artisans, fire-makers and stone-knappers.

All of which leads to an encounter with the modern beast - of Korea circa 2011, as encapsulated in the new museum. Coiled, lying in wait, revealing unexpected vistas, reveling in its new-found technological expertise, nestled in, among, beside the old, the ancient, the prehistoric. Highly reflective, hi-tech, perhaps a little submissive. The cross-sections reveal flattened forms from what would otherwise be circular sections, with some lack of subtlety to the geometry. There is a sense of response to the vastness of the sky, and a sinking down if not into, at least onto the earth, beside the earth, near the earth, but also

detached. Does the earth have too much ancient history, and too much that interferes with the present? Are we so mandated to rush onwards, into the future?

#### 4 Some Environmental Consequences of the Perception of Collective Society as the Fundamental Reality

This free-wheeling exploration of the paleolithic site and of contemporary Korea indicates a critical problem: the widespread perception that collective society is the fundamental reality that must be respected and whose dictates must be obeyed. Nature, whose primary function is to cater for human need and desire, is subordinate. Individual apprehension of reality, whether phenomenal or noumenal, is to be subordinated to collective will. What is important is to maintain appearances and to satisfy collective expectations, against which individual intuition and apprehension of reality count for very little.

Such a homocentric and socio-centric stance inevitably has dire environmental consequences. The immediate reality the individual encounters can be ignored, as essentially he or she has no inherent “beingness”, nor any intrinsic worth. Animals, similarly, can be maltreated (as the poor treatment of cats confirms). Garbage can be just left in nature (or in the city), presumably because the collective does not feel strongly enough about it to prohibit such acts. The environment exists to serve human purposes, and has an infinite capacity to absorb human activities and their waste products; and if it does not, then so what? (It reveals the too-common contemporary attitude of *Après moi le déluge*). The individual’s experience of the consequences of this, as he encounters litter and pollution, is simply to ignore it, and to consider it not his problem (and, one fears, not even a problem).

#### 5 The Delusion of Power and the Restoration of Authenticity

Within this collective mindset, power usurps the proper role of the Sacred. What is important is no longer to seek God; it is to seek Power. Traditional virtues, of Goodness, Beauty and Truth, are neglected and even subverted; what matters is to be close to power, to be superior, to assume and to exercise power (which brings with it an unwarranted arrogance). But Tradition is very clear in asserting the illusionary nature of such a preoccupation and identification with power. To embrace power is to mistake the world of appearances for that of the Real. Power serves to blind the individual to the noumenal realm that lies beyond and within the world of phenomenal appearances.

Contemporary Korean society not infrequently appears quite out of control. Does it serve only to satisfy the selfish ends of a small minority enjoying exalted positions of power? It is difficult to maintain that it truly serves the needs of its people; members of

this society seem conditioned into a rabid nationalism, and incapable of redressing or even recognizing the severe degradation of the socio-physical environment that unenlightened development has wrought. Individuals and institutions both seem incapable of functioning effectively, and of acting in a responsible manner. Intrinsic to this malaise is a loss of authenticity in everyday life; it is as if *ontos*, the being capacity of phenomena, is being exhausted, under the relentless pressure of ill-advised development and illusory progress, as the environment, as Nature itself, succumbs to the great collective illusion of Korea, Inc.

#### 6 Conclusion

This has not been an easy paper to prepare. But it is difficult to maintain with any sincerity a blind confidence in Korea’s future. This collective society grimly drains the good will and honest effort of its citizens, both native and expat, before discarding them at age 60. It severely pollutes its environment. From where will it find the resolve to take the essential remedial steps needed to restore a healthy world?

We can only pray that open criticism of the kind we attempt in this paper, however misguided or resented, might encourage a re-visioning of this society’s politics, in a deeply-needed questioning of what it means to be Korean, human, and sentient. We seek the restoration of a translucent vision that will again honor perennial values of Goodness, of Beauty, and of Truth. One senses that such an authentic vision once thrived in the paleolithic site of Jeongok-ri.

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