

*Koryŏ Kŭmsŏngmun yŏn'gu*

고려금석문연구(Koryŏ Epigraphs: Social History Engraved in Stone)

By Kim Yongsŏn: Ilchogak, 2004. 411 pages. ₩23,000 (Hardcover)

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Koryŏ society was aristocratic and deeply Buddhist. Buddhism not only governed the public and social life in the kingdom, but also informed the more intimate dimensions of the lives of Koryŏ people. No true picture of Koryŏ society can be gained without an understanding of its ruling aristocratic class and the role of Buddhism. These, however, are elusive subjects. It is established that Koryŏ's aristocratic class coincided with its political leadership, made up of high government officials of the kingdom. There is no consensus, though, and little is known about the criteria for discerning hereditary aristocrats from non-hereditary ones. Similarly, while many sons of Koryŏ's aristocratic families became monks, little is known about the lifestyle or status of Buddhist priests in this society.

*Koryŏ Epigraphs: Social History Engraved in Stone (Koryŏ kŭmsŏngmun yŏn'gu: Tol e saegyŏjin sahoesa)*, as its title makes it clear, is an attempt to cast light on Koryŏ society through epigraphs found on *myojimyŏng* and Buddhist steles. The book provides a vivid glimpse into the moral life and mores of this medieval society through details on the nature of aristocratic consciousness in its ruling class, marriage and birth-related customs and the lives of Koryŏ monks. Unlike tombstones, erected in front of a tomb, *myojimyŏng* are stone slabs buried underground, containing inscriptions detailing the life of the deceased, along with information pertaining to his or her family. Kim Yongsŏn, a professor at Hallym University, has long been interested in *myojimyŏng*. His earlier publication, *Koryŏ myojimyŏng chipsŏng*, is a compilation of his findings on these burial stone slab inscrip-

tions. Meanwhile, *Koryŏ Epigraphs*, published in 2004, is a collection of essays analyzing *myojimyŏng* and steles.

The *Koryŏsa* (The History of Koryŏ), the basic reference source for all those studying Koryŏ history, was in fact written during the early Chosŏn period. *Myojimyŏng* and stone steles were authored by Koryŏ people themselves, and constitute first-hand sources of information on this society. They are therefore the best and most authentic sources of information available on Koryŏ society. It would be, however, unrealistic to hope to obtain a general picture of this society from *myojimyŏng*, which register only the lives of members of its ruling class. Still, the rubbings of these stone slabs nevertheless undoubtedly have the potential to provide important clues as to the upper stratum of Koryŏ society.

*Koryŏ Epigraphs* comprises four parts. The first three are devoted to *myojimyŏng*. The author reconstitutes the lifestyle of members of the Koryŏ aristocracy based on evidence derived from *myojimyŏng* inscriptions, and presents new *myojimyŏng* texts discovered since his last book on the subject. Part IV, dealing with Buddhist steles, discusses the lives of monks, including the process of initiation to the priesthood and confirmation. What follows is a detailed summary of the four parts making up this book.

Part I, "Aristocratic Consciousness in Koryŏ Ruling Class and Family Pedigree," contains three essays: "Accession to Hereditary Aristocracy and Aristocratic Pedigree," "Genealogical Records and Clan Registry in Koryŏ," and "Social Coteries in Koryŏ and the Kim Podang–Han Ŏn'guk Coup." In "Accession to Hereditary Aristocracy and Aristocratic Pedigree," Kim examines the defining characteristics of families considered as hereditary aristocrats by Koryŏ people. An analysis of *myojimyŏng* inscriptions relating to sixty-one families confirmed that hereditary aristocrats are descendants of a *chaech'u*, the highest government office in this kingdom, or an individual bestowed a form of royal recognition for meritorious service. His findings suggest that a tie to the royal household through marriage and the precedence of having passed state government official recruitment examinations were also considered important criteria. By clearly identifying key attributes of Koryŏ's hereditary elite, Kim's illuminating essay sheds important light on a previously little-known aspect of the history of this era, making a major

scholarly contribution in this field.

In “Genealogical Records and Clan Registry in Koryŏ,” Kim turns to the problem of establishing when documenting family genealogy began in Koryŏ, and how this practice evolved. The author dates the beginning of this practice to around King Sŏngjong’s reign (r. 981-997) which saw, according to him, the first emergence of a sense of aristocratic entitlement in the kingdom’s ruling elite. An initially simple record, documenting only essential facts, later grew in scope to include details on larger numbers of family members. This trend became especially pronounced since the reign of King Ch’ungnyŏl (r. 1274-1308), due to the political situation of the time, he explains. The participation in the kingdom’s politics by people of humble birth, which began around this time, prompted aristocrats to look for ways to assert the distinction between themselves and officials of more modest extraction, according to the author. A more comprehensive genealogical record like the *chokpo* (clan registry) appeared in the later part of the dynasty, under the rule of King U (r. 1374-1388). The ever-growing size of family records eventually gave rise to clan registries, helped also by the arrival of Neo-Confucianism, which assigned a greater importance to the family, though the author points out that the influence of Neo-Confucianism is but one of the contributing factors. The phenomenon, he says, is closely related to the political context of the late Koryŏ Period, where Yuan China was extensively interfering with the domestic affairs of the Korean kingdom.

The political event discussed in “Social Coteries in Koryŏ and the Kim Podang—Han Ŏn’guk Coup” occurred three years after the military coup of 1170. Kim Podang, revolting against the military regime, attempted to restore King Ŭijong, with Han Ŏn’guk as his right-hand man. The article looks into the relationships between members of the Koryŏ elite known to have taken direct part in this counter-coup. Most of these people, he found, were blood relatives of Kim Podang and Han Ŏn’guk or in-laws, related to the latter by multiple marriages. They were further linked by the official recruitment examinations, via the examiner-examinee relationship. Coteries in Koryŏ’s political class were very closely knit, based on bonds at multiple levels. Few or no government officials, the author contends, could have been free from this type of tight bonding in this period. The web of relationships

linking aristocrats of Koryŏ that Kim retraced makes this thesis of his entirely plausible.

Part II, "Social Portrait of Koryŏ Aristocracy," groups together three essays, respectively, "Marriage, Procreation, and Life Expectancy among Koryŏ Elite," "Burial Sites of Koryŏ's Ruling Class Members" and "Koryŏ Cultures: The Capital and the Provinces." In "Marriage, Procreation, and Life Expectancy among Koryŏ Elite," Kim investigates the cases of 282 individuals. His statistical analysis indicates that upper-class Koryŏ men were married, on average, at the age of 20, and women at the age of 16. The average marrying age, he found, gradually decreased as the dynasty approached its later period. The fertility rate was 5.1 children per woman, and the average lifespan 64.5 years for both sexes. These results, obtained from a significant larger sample group than twenty to thirty individuals used in previous studies of this type, are markedly superior to others of its kind in reliability, even if they concern only one of the several social groups making up this society.

In "Burial Sites of Koryŏ's Ruling Class Members," the author delves into the subject of geographical distribution of tombs of upper-class Koryŏ people. In the initial period of this dynasty, tombs of the most privileged were concentrated in Kaesŏng and the Kyŏnggi region. Nobles were buried outside the capital region under the military rule of Koryŏ, and this trend became generalized toward the later part of the dynasty. A clear indicator of an important change affecting the ruling segment of this society, the phenomenon suggests that the capital area gradually ceased to be the sole base for Koryŏ's aristocrats. Although this conclusion is not as such a novelty, the author proposes an interesting connection between the phenomenon of widening geographical distribution of the burial sites of Koryŏ nobles and notables and the province-based scholar-officials of the subsequent Chosŏn dynasty.

In "Koryŏ Cultures: The Capital and the Provinces," the author explores the cultural difference that may have existed between the kingdom's capital and its provinces, based on a crucial fact that came to his attention: that all those buried with a *myojimyŏng* occupied posts whose appointment was directly handled by the central government. Out of the

total of 322 *myojimyǒng* that have survived to the present, 270 belonged to men, twenty of whom appeared to have been monks. Excluding the twenty monks, these 250 men had all occupied an office under the direct control of the royal government. What this suggests is quite unambiguously that burying *myojimyǒng* was a practice reserved to royal government officials. It has been long assumed that there existed no institutional barrier preventing Koryŏ-period local government officials from an appointment to position in the central government. Kim's finding reveals that the reality was somewhat removed from this long-held assumption. Even if not an insurmountable barrier like that in place in Chosŏn, we learn that there was a clear distinction between central government and local government employees in Koryŏ.

Part III, "New Revelations on Koryŏ Society: Recently Discovered *Myojimyǒng*" is made up of two articles: "*The Myojimyǒng* of Kim Chungmun" and "*The Myojimyǒng* of Ko Yŏngjung and His Granddaughter Lady Ko." Kim Chungmun, the owner of the new *myojimyǒng* that Kim discusses in the first of the two articles, was a man never mentioned in authoritative sources such as the *Koryŏsa* or the *Koryŏsa chŏryo* (Essentials of KoryŏHistory). According to the *myojimyǒng* inscriptions, his career in public office, which began in 1204, lasted about thirty years. Kim Chungmun appears to have harbored a particular loathing for the Mongols. The arrival of a Mongol envoy in 1221, referenced to in these inscriptions and never documented in any other records, is a fresh new clue for scholars of this period.

In "*The Myojimyǒng* of Ko Yŏngjung and His Granddaughter Lady Ko," the author unveils biographical details of a previously unknown Koryŏ-era political personality. Ko Yŏngjung, according to the inscriptions on his granddaughter Lady Ko's *myojimyǒng*, attained fame and glory under Ch'oe Ch'unghŏn's rule. Lady Ko, the reader learns, lived through the collapse of the short-lived military rule and the kingdom's transition into a new phase of relationship with the Mongols, as an intimate insider. These stone slab inscriptions further revealed that the chronicle of Lady Ko's life was authored by Yi Chehyŏn, while providing a wealth of information relating to the evolution in the kingdom's ruling class through the turbulent times of the late Koryŏ Period. If the *myojimyǒng* inscriptions indeed date from the

periods to which they are currently attributed, they must be the foremost reference for all Koryŏ specialists. However, for now, caution may be the best route to take, as most of them are either rubbings without the original inscriptions or photographs of rubbings, often in reduced sizes.

Part IV, titled "Buddhism in Koryŏ and Epigraphs," groups together three essays: "Kwangjong's Reform and Kwibŏpsa Temple," "Buddhism in the Early Koryŏ Period: The Pŏbanjong Order and Chijong," and "The Lives of Koryŏ Monks." In "Kwangjong's Reform and Kwibŏpsa Temple," Kim describes the resistance that Kwangjong's reform encountered from powerful clans. To gain broader support for his reform initiatives, in 963 Kwangjong built Kwibŏpsa Temple and held Buddhist services and meetings there. The king succeeded in winning over discontented factions of Koryŏ society, resentful and wary of the unchecked power of these mighty families, thereby widening the support base of his reform agenda. Eminent monks of Kwangjong's time like Kyunyŏ and T'anmun were proponents of *sŏngsang yunghoe* and *kyosŏn ilch'i*, unificationist outlooks that advocate the oneness of the Buddhist faith beyond sectarian differences. This stance appears to have greatly facilitated Kwangjong's reform initiative. Beyond being allies for the reform, the two Huayan monks were also close friends of the king. Buddhism indeed provided Kwangjong with a crucial support base for his political platform. Kim's enlightening article successfully brings to the fore the political and social role played by Buddhism in Kwangjong's reform.

In "Buddhism in the Early Koryŏ Period: The Pŏbanjong Order and Chijong," the author portrays Chijong as a Sŏn Buddhist monk who held a tolerant view on and inclusive attitude toward non-Sŏn Buddhism. The public recruitment system implemented by Kwangjong for ordaining monks clearly served to advance the king's reform agenda. The unification of Sŏn and non-Sŏn Buddhism was a *sine qua non* condition for the absolute monarchy the latter envisioned for Koryŏ. In his effort to bring around religious groups to his cause, the king first approached Sŏn Buddhists, the mainstream branch, supported by powerful families. Chijong was initiated to Pŏbanjong or the Fayan School, in China. Fayan Buddhism was a Sŏn Buddhist sect that incorporated doctrinal elements of the Tien-tai School, Huayan School and the Pŏpsangjong and sought to achieve unity between

Sŏn and non-Sŏn Buddhism. Between 968 and 970, a schism of a sort within the Huayan School permitted Sŏn Buddhists to regain its previous position of dominance. It is around this time that Chijong returned to Koryŏ. The Fayan School emerged during the reign of Kwangjong as a leading doctrinal current, while its actual influence soon faded. Chijong's career, unfolding itself during this brief period of influence of the Fayan doctrine, was able to play a major role. At a time of open confrontation between the royal power and mighty clans, a unificationist stance embraced by the Fayan doctrine is most likely to have been an ideological reference, with both symbolical and practical repercussions.

"The Lives of Koryŏ Monks" discusses biographic details of ninety-three Buddhist monks, provided by inscriptions on stone steles. While the official age from which a Koryŏ adolescent was allowed to enter the priesthood was 15, the actual age, the author found, was about 12 and 1/2. Apprentice monks were ordained at the age of about 17 and 1/2. The age for entering the priesthood gradually increased from late Silla to late Koryŏ, whereas the age of ordainment decreased over the same period. During the late Koryŏ Period, from the time of King Myŏngjong and onward, ordainment often took place at the same time as initiation. Women were not allowed to join the priesthood. Exceptions were, however, made for women with compromised marital prospects or in other special circumstances.

Finally, the book has an appendix providing a list of 322 Koryŏ-period *myojimyŏng*. The list contains the year of birth and the year of death of individuals to which each *myojimyŏng* is dedicated, the age at which they received their government office appointments and passed the state recruitment examination, along with the names of those who authored each *myojimyŏng*. This list, both exhaustive and extremely well-organized, is a boon to all students of this period.

*Myojimyŏng* inscriptions, without a doubt, offer privileged insights into Koryŏ's upper-class society. However, one question still lingers: can statistics based on surviving *myojimyŏng* truly yield a faithful picture of all central government officials? This is a nagging uncertainty that potentially weakens the validity of not just this study, but case studies in general. On the other hand, Kim's work has the merit of basing its arguments on evidence from a

relatively large number of *myojimyŏng*.

Another minor reservation I have concerns his treatment of the name changes undergone by Koryŏ aristocracy. The kingdom's aristocrats, referred to as "*Samhan sejok*" or "*Haedong kapchok*" during the early part of the dynasty, were later given the names, "*pugwŏnujok*" or "*kunjigaül*." The author links this change to the emergence of the new *sadaebu* (literati) class. This interpretation, however, is somewhat narrow, insofar as the phenomenon can be a result of multiple factors, including the influence of the military regime and interference from Yuan China during the late Koryŏ Period. A future study may yield a more in-depth analysis of the issue, however.

Kim's inquiry into the age of marriage, fertility, and lifespan among upper-class members of Koryŏ society is overall highly fruitful. Valuable though these findings are, their relative interest is undercut by the absence of corresponding statistics concerning the general population of this society. While this is certainly due to the lack of relevant data, it is, nevertheless, regrettable that the reader is unable to place these facts against a historical context. These weaknesses, however, are rather inconsequential given what gigantic endeavors this work must have involved, and do not diminish in any way its contributions in broadening our understanding of Koryŏ society and the importance of the service rendered by this volume to Koryŏ scholarship.