

“Koguryo Stele Inscriptions as Historical Sources”: A Panel at the Association of Asian Studies 2014 Annual Conference

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I. Introduction

The 2014 annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) was held from March 27-30 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the United States. For this conference, a group of researchers from the Northeast Asian History Foundation organized the panel “Koguryo Stele Inscriptions as Historical Sources” in celebration of the 1600th anniversary of the erection of the Gwanggaeto Stele, the most valuable historical source from Koguryo.¹ The four researchers gave their presentations in the following order:

1. Kyung-sook Keum, “The Gwanggaeto Stele and the Myth of Koguryo’s Founder”

¹ The panel members wish to express their deep gratitude to Professor John Duncan, of the University of California, Los Angeles, not only for chairing the panel session, but also for providing much valuable advice in organizing the panel. The panelists look forward to meeting again with scholars of East Asian studies from around the world to further discuss issues concerning the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo.

2. Seong-je Lee, “The Historical Significance of the Gwanggaeto Stele”
3. Hyun-sook Kim, “Research Trends in Tomb Guards in the Inscriptions of the Gwanggaeto and Koguryo Stelae in Ji’an”
4. Kwang-eui Ko, “What Stelae Reveal about Koguryo’s Written Culture”

The main purpose of this panel, which was chaired by John Duncan, Professor of Korean History at the University of California, Los Angeles, was to introduce recent findings and current research trends in Korean scholarship on Koguryo stelae. With the paucity of written documents from early Korean history, the value of the inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele can never be over-emphasized. The stele text was composed by Koguryo people in the early fifth century, and it reflects their own perspectives on their politics, international status, and society. Although the inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele has been researched extensively from many different angles since its discovery in the late nineteenth century, Koguryo stelae discovered subsequently in Korea in 1979 and in Ji’an in 2012 generated new insights into the Gwanggaeto Stele’s significance and interpretation of its inscription. By introducing the recent scholarly development among Korean historians, the panel offered a more comprehensive understanding of Koguryo’s politics, society, and culture and facilitated an exchange of ideas among international scholars.

Throughout the presentations and discussion, the panel agreed that the Gwanggaeto Stele was created in an effort to evince the world view held by Koguryo’s royal family in the early fifth century and that it represents the status Koguryo held in the world of Eastern Yi (東夷). In ancient societies, inscriptions on stone monuments served a vital role as official documents. In this regard, the Stele’s great value as historical material cannot be stressed enough for not only disclosing the Koguryo royal family’s thoughts on private possessions in the fifth century, but also containing highly important details which cannot be found in other written sources.

II. Presentation Highlights

The session began with a brief introduction of the Gwanggaeto Stele. The Gwanggaeto Stele was erected in 414 CE, the second year of King Jangsu's reign. This stele is immense in size, at a height of 6.4 meters, a width of 1.45 meters, and an estimated weight of 35 to 37 tons. Simple and minimally adorned, its structure has an independent style different from other contemporary Northeast Asian tombstones, and the calligraphy of the inscription is unique and aesthetically admirable. The inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele has 1,802 characters and is broadly composed of three parts: first, a genealogical biography of King Gwanggaeto that identifies Jumong as the kingdom's founding father; second, a chronicle of King Gwanggaeto's territorial conquests; and third, administrative records and instructions regarding tomb guards. Aspects of these three parts were discussed by Kyung-sook Keum, Seong-je Lee, and Hyun-sook Kim, while Kwang-eui Ko highlighted the calligraphic style of the inscription from the viewpoint of comparative cultural history.

Kyung-sook Keum's presentation focused on the first part of the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription, in particular, the myth of Koguryo's founding father, Jumong. The Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription states that Jumong was from Northern Buyeo, whereas *Samguk sagi* (三國史記 History of the Three Kingdoms) states that Jumong was from Eastern Buyeo. By comparing the times when these differing accounts of Jumong's origin were recorded, Keum argued that these conflicting accounts were politically motivated by the ruling household of Koguryo, which desired to claim the authenticity of its royal line and secure its position in power.

Seong-je Lee examined the second part of the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription, which sheds light on the regional order among the ancient kingdoms in Northeast Asia. Lee claimed that the stele carries historical significance in the following regards: (i) Koguryo erected an immense monument with a unique appearance, distinguished from other

conventional stelae in the region, as a medium to proclaim a new national order (ii) The inscription on the stele supplements the limitations of Chinese documents written from the perspectives of Chinese dynasties, providing Koguryo's perspectives on the political and military order of the Liaodong (遼東) region, an arena of competition in ancient Northeast Asia (iii) Finally, the Gwanggaeto Stele provides evidence for a "regional world" led by Koguryo, independent from a world revolving around China.

Hyun-sook Kim compared the description of tomb guards on the Gwanggaeto Stele with that on the Koguryo Stele recently discovered in Ji'an in 2012. While the Ji'an Koguryo Stele contains a fairly similar description of tomb guards, it also has accounts that are dissimilar to those in the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription. This has spawned debate among Korean scholars over tomb guards of that period, which Kim covered by introducing research trends in Korean academia on tomb guards described in the two stele inscriptions. The importance of understanding the tomb guard system lies in its direct connection to social and economic issues in ancient East Asia.

Finally, Kwang-eui Ko showed that the appearance of the Gwanggaeto Stele and the calligraphic style in its inscription provides important clues to further understanding the history and culture of Koguryo. The unique stone-pillar shape of the Stele is clearly different from the style common to other monuments erected at the time in East Asia, demonstrating that Koguryo had sought for an identity of its own while maintaining communication with its neighbors, including central China. Ko also introduced diverse calligraphic styles that can be seen in other remains from the Koguryo era.

III. The Main Issues Discussed

Comments made during the discussion that followed the presentations include:

1. The founding myth of Koguryo provides a new understanding of the relationship between Koguryo and Eastern Buyeo. Comparative studies of the myth by applying an East Asian perspective should be able to contribute in making further progress.
2. Discussing the Koguryo-oriented regional order, developing separately from a world order centered around the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) dynasties, is significant since such a discussion extends to those on the history of pre-modern Korea as well as Joseon.
3. Research on the social status of tomb guards that appear in the inscription on the Ji'an Koguryo stele should be approached within a broader historical context, such as the social structure of Koguryo at the time.
4. The unique forms of Koguryo stelae and the characteristics of calligraphic styles found in their inscriptions provide important clues to understanding the history and culture of Koguryo.

In response to the first comment, Kyung-sook Keum discussed her plan for comparative research on the foundation myths of various East Asian peoples. The important motif of Koguryo's foundation myth came from Northern Buyeo, and it also shares similar elements with those of the Tuoba clan and Mongols. Therefore, she believes that comparative research on such myths will reveal universalities and particularities in Koguryo's own story about its foundation. The comments and suggestions that emerged during the discussion will be consulted in the future to improve the papers presented at the panel.