

The Gwanggaeto Stele and the Myth of Koguryo's Founder

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Introduction

Tombstones and inscriptions on tombs, as well as documents, provide significant information about ancient times. As there are not enough written documents remaining from the early period, such inscriptions engraved in stones are important historical materials. Their value therefore lies in the fact that the materials were created at that time. In this regard, the historical significance of the Gwanggaeto Stele erected 1,600 years ago cannot be stressed enough.

The Gwanggaeto Stele was erected in 414, the second year of the reign of King Gwanggaeto's son King Jangsu. The inscription on the tombstone is largely comprised of three parts. The first part describes the founding myth of Koguryo along with its royal genealogy and the life history of King Gwanggaeto. The second part chronicles King Gwanggaeto's external activities and achievements. And the third part concerns the tomb guards (*sumyoin* 守墓人) of royal tombs. This presentation today will introduce the trends of research in Korean academia on the myth of Jumong, or the founding myth of Koguryo.

1. What the Founding Myth of Koguryo (The Myth of Jumong) Tells Us

The Gwanggaeto Stele is 6.39 meters tall and from 1.3 to 2 meters wide. It is estimated to weigh more than 34 tons. At present, among the inscriptions on the tombstone, 1,775 characters are legible. The first part is comprised of 242 characters and is relatively well maintained compared to the rest of the inscription. The inscription begins by briefly covering the founder Jumong's origin, birth, south-bound migration, and the founding of Koguryo. The description is highly significant in that it was recorded by Koguryo people themselves, reflecting the ruling class's own recognition of the kingdom's founder. The inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele can be said to be the closest resemblance to the founding myth passed down across the domain of Koguryo.

The first paragraph of the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription includes the following: “The first ancestor King Jumong (鄒牟王) laid the foundations of our state. He came forth from Northern Buyeo (北夫餘) as the son of the Celestial Emperor (天帝). His mother was the daughter of the Earl of the River (河伯). He was born by cracking an egg and was endowed with heavenly virtue. (After going through many challenges) he built a fortress and established his capital upon the mountain west of Holbon (忽本) in Piryu Valley (沸流谷). On the hill east of Cholbon, the King ascended to heaven.”

The founding myth engraved in the tombstone narrates in the order of Jumong's “birth–travel–foundation of a state–ascension.” This corresponds to a narrative structure common to founding myths. The unique circumstance of Jumong's migration in order to found Koguryo could have been the cause for adopting such a common structure. The founding myth of Koguryo makes multiple appearances in Chinese and Korean records, as well as in epigraphs. Its contents vary: some are very brief, others are more detailed or complicated, and some share similarities while others contain details that conflict with those in other records.

Inscriptions in stone include those on the Gwanggaeto Stele and the Moduru tomb epitaph (牟頭婁墓誌). Chinese history texts such as *Book of Wei* (魏書), *Book of Liang* (梁書), *Book of Zhou* (周書), *Book of Sui* (隋書), and *History of the Northern Dynasties* (北史) have separate sections on Koguryo (高句麗傳). Korean history texts which describe Koguryo history include *Samguk sagi* (三國史記 History of the Three Kingdoms), *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事 Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) and *Dongmyeong-wang pyeon* (東明王篇 Lay of King Dongmyeong) in *Dongguk Yi Sangguk jip* (東國李相國集 Collected Works of Minister Yi) written by Yi Gyu-bo.

By reviewing how the name of the founder has been recorded, the lineage of all these materials can be identified. Koguryo epigraphs refer to the progenitor as King Chumo (鄒牟王), while Chinese documents say Jumong (朱蒙). On the other hand, *Samguk sagi* and *Dongmyeong-wang pyeon* describe that “the founder’s royal title (王號) is Dongmyeong (東明) and his given name is Jumong.” *Samguk yusa* states, “King Dongmyeong’s given name is Jumong, but it is also written as Chumong (鄒蒙).” As Jumong and Chumo are different written expressions of the same pronunciation, they can both be considered as referring to the forefather of Koguryo. Despite differences in detail or in the length of the stories found in documents such as *Samguk sagi* and *Dongmyeong-wang pyeon*, they all seem to have been derived from *Gu Samguksa* (舊三國史 Old History of the Three Kingdoms). Given that the kingdoms Buyeo, Koguryo, and Baekje all identified their founder as King Dongmyeong, the myth seems to have been passed down among them, and as tribes of the same Buyeo descent split off and migrated, they modified or recreated the original myth.

There are largely two arguments regarding how the Jumong myth came to be created and established. One argues that the reason the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription states that Jumong was from Northern Buyeo, while *Samguk sagi* records that Jumong was from Eastern Buyeo is because the myth’s establishment took place throughout two different

periods. Scholars supportive of this theory take the fifth-century tombstone inscription describing that Jumong came from Northern Buyeo as evidence identifying when the Jumong myth was established. Another basis for this theory are descriptions in *Koguryo bongi* (高句麗本紀 Records of Koguryo) in *Samguk sagi* referring to the north while tracing Koguryo's trade relations with Buyeo.

How then do these scholars understand the relationship between Northern Buyeo and Eastern Buyeo? The answer to this question calls for a brief overview of the history of Buyeo. Centered in Jilin (吉林), Buyeo was invaded by Murong Xianbei (慕容鮮卑) in 285. The invasion was a deathblow to Buyeo, resulting in the loss of its capital and its king's suicide. It also forced some groups to flee in the direction of Northern Okjeo (北沃沮). Buyeo was later able to reclaim the Jilin area with the support of Jin (晉). When Koguryo conquered Longshan (鹿山), or modern Jilin, in the early fourth century, Buyeo moved west, closer to the Former Yan (前燕). Nevertheless, the invasion by Murong Huang (慕容皝) in 345 left Buyeo irreparably damaged and barely surviving. Consequently, Buyeo surrendered to Koguryo in 494. Given this history, Buyeo moved to Northern Okjeo at the end of the third century and later returned to its original capital in Jilin around the fourth century, which shows that they had regarded the Northern Okjeo area, where the remaining Buyeo people resided, as Eastern Buyeo.

Koguryo conquered the center of Buyeo over the first half of the fourth century. Koguryo also suffered great damage in 342, the twelfth year of the reign of King Kogugwon (故國原王), when King Murong Huang of the Former Yan invaded its capital. In order to overcome the national crisis, Koguryo conducted institutional reforms during the rule of King Sosurim (小獸林王). After stabilizing domestic affairs, King Gwanggaeto strengthened Koguryo's national power by expanding its territory. Territorial expansion and population growth allowed Koguryo's royal family to internally and externally declare themselves as descendants of heaven. King Jangsu's erection of a huge monument after

King Gwanggaeto's death declaring that the first ancestor of Koguryo was from Northern Buyeo thereby emphasized Koguryo's authority and symbolism. However, as conflicts over succession to the throne diminished Koguryo's royal authority and changed its political system in the mid-sixth century, those from Eastern Buyeo seem to have altered the myth to emphasize the influence of Eastern Buyeo. Later historical documents such as *Samguk sagi* are believed to reflect these alterations.

A different argument posits that the myth of Jumong was created from the beginning of Koguryo. Scholars who support this explanation take its basis from not only the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription, but also from tales involving Jumong that are cited in *Onjo-wang bongi* (溫祚王本紀 Records of King Onjo) in *Samguk sagi*, which contains Baekje's version of the story. This argument understands the Jumong myth to have been created when the Gyeru tribe (桂婁部), which was Jumong's major supporter, founded a state in the areas of Cholbon (卒本) and the Gungnae Fortress (國內城). The structure and episodes of the Dongmyeong myth, handed down among the Koguryo royal family and the Buyeo tribe, were borrowed and developed into the Jumong myth. This puts the myth's creation at around the third month of the third year of King Daemushin's reign, when the tomb of King Dongmyeong was constructed. According to this argument, the basic structure of a myth is created when it is necessary, and once the myth is nationally accepted and recorded, it earns a sanctity which cannot be easily changed. This interpretation therefore supposes that although it may be possible to make small adjustments as a myth is transmitted, such adjustments do not affect its basic structure.

In terms of the birth of Jumong, this argument highlights what is recorded in *Samguk sagi*. The part which describes the reign of King Dongmyeong notes that Jumong was born in Eastern Buyeo, founded according to a heavenly order by Buyeo's King Haeburu (解夫婁) at Gaseopwon (迦葉原) on the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula. Given the description that Haemosu (解慕漱), the alleged son of the Celestial Emperor (天帝), took power in Buyeo's old capital after Haeburu (解夫婁)

moved out, it seems that Haeburu's group migrated to the east due to conflicts with Haemosu's group. Yuhwa (柳花) had sexual relations with Haemosu and gave birth to Jumong. In this regard, Jumong was born in Eastern Buyeo, but his paternal line came from Buyeo. This argument is interesting for presuming that Eastern Buyeo was established before Jumong was born and that Jumong had certain relations with Buyeo, unlike the other argument which insists Eastern Buyeo was created in the third century.

2. The Function of the Founding Myth of Koguryo

Central to the Jumong myth are the premises that Jumong is the "son of the Celestial Emperor" and that his mother is the "Earl of the River" (河伯). These premises mean that the Koguryo king's legitimacy was rooted upon the belief that the king is the son of heaven and a descendant of Habaek (河伯), the god of agriculture that guarantees prosperity. The Moduru tomb epitaph's reference to Jumong as the son of heaven demonstrates that noble families also wanted to display their close relationships with the royal family. The phrase "the grandson of the Earl of the River, the son of the sun and moon" (河伯之孫, 日月之子) is repeated three times in the Moduru tomb epitaph. Such repetition emphasizes that their ancestors came from Northern Buyeo along with Jumong, revealing the long history of these noble families and their close relationship with the royal family from the early days. This sort of ostentation would have been connected to the practical interests of solidifying a noble family's political standing.

How, then, was this symbolic founding myth of Koguryo sustained and recognized anew? The royal family and the ruling class passed down the founding myth by engraving it in epigraphs. This would have contributed to legitimizing the royal family's authority since inscriptions on stone monuments also served as official documents. In addition, the myth might have been expressed in the form of a heavenly ritual called

dongmaeng (東盟), held as a national harvest ceremony (國中大會) of Koguryo. Reenacting the myth through ritual procedures would have helped people remember the founding father of Koguryo. These ancestral rites for the celestial god (天神) and the progenitor Dongmyeong (東明) would have been performed by people from Buyeo according to their own tradition ever since they arrived at the Cholbon (卒本) area. They would have presented a convincing image of the divine mother Sinmo (神母) of Koguryo's founder, inspired from the well-known earth goddess Jimosin (地母神), who was widely worshiped in the agricultural Buyeo society. On the other hand, this reenactment of the founding myth through ancestral rituals at national ceremonies would demonstrate that the divine authority of Koguryo's founder was being materialized through the present king. The king thereby secured the sanctity of royal authority as well as the legitimacy of his reign. The significance of the founding myth for ancient states is not simply to portray historical facts. By mythicizing their founder, they tried to gain legitimacy for the royal family and their successors as well as justification of their rule. As such, the myth of a state's founder in ancient times was closely linked to the matter of building legitimacy for the state's royal family.

Conclusion

This text covers the trends of Korean academia regarding the content of Koguryo's founding myth inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele. By describing the founding myth, the royal family tree, and the life history of King Gwanggaeto, the first part of the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription clearly reveals the Koguryo royal family's view on fifth century history. For this, the inscription on the tombstone becomes invaluable historical documentation.

Records about the myth of Koguryo's founder and interpretations of them vary. In studying the histories of Buyeo and Koguryo, more attention should be paid to determining the identities and geographical

locations of the states called Buyeo, Northern Buyeo, and Eastern Buyeo. Identifying exactly when Eastern Buyeo was established is a particularly important topic for gaining a better understanding of not only Koguryo's founding myth, but also the history of Koguryo throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.

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