

# The Historical Significance of the Gwanggaeto Stele

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Anyone interested in early Korean history knows of the Gwanggaeto Stele. However, it is unlikely that he or she knows the tombstone is an important historical record of Koguryo and the oldest and largest stone monument in Korean history. In preparing this presentation with most participants being from the Western academic world, the priority therefore is how best to introduce and discuss what is inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele to those who may not be familiar with the stele's text. This presentation will also cover the tombstone's significance from an East Asian perspective.

## 1. The Unique Appearance of the Gwanggaeto Stele

The Gwanggaeto Stele is 6.39 meters tall and 1.3-2 meters wide, and weighs almost 34 tons. Such a huge stone monument is rarely found even in China where such tombstones were first erected and developed. The Wuzi bei (無字碑), or the Wordless stele, in Qianling, Xian of China is well-known as a tombstone for Empress Wu Zetian (則天武后) of the Tang Dynasty. Though larger and heavier than the Gwanggaeto Stele, this

monument's historical significance does not match its popularity, for no characters were inscribed into this stone.<sup>1</sup> The Gwanggaeto Stele, on the other hand, is a historical record of that time with its inscription of 1,775 characters presenting a substantial amount of content. The inscription on the tombstone mentions that King Jangsu erected the monument to commemorate his father's accomplishments.

There are other features to this national monument that make the stele physically unique. It resembles little of what one may consider to be the conventional shape of a tombstone. Comparing the stele with the Wuzi bei reveals even more clearly its uniqueness. The Wuzi bei has a squarely



Figure 1. Wuzi bei

trimmed body, and has a head and pedestal. Its surface is perfectly smoothed though no inscription has been carved into it. Conversely, the Gwanggaeto Stele is made of a barely refined huge stone that retains most of its raw form. Were it not for the inscription, it might be difficult to identify it as a tombstone. The surfaces where characters have been inscribed are also very uneven, suggesting that it must have been difficult to carve those characters.

Given its shape, it may be suggested that technology in that period was not sufficiently

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<sup>1</sup> The Wuzi bei monument is 7.53 meters tall, 2.1 meters wide, and 1.49 meters thick and weighs approximately 98.8 tons.

refined to better embellish the tombstone. However, this assumption is not valid as sophisticated stone craftsmanship was found in royal tombs created in the same period. The recently discovered Ji'an Koguryo Stele also displays the formulaic appearance of a tombstone. That is to say, the monument has a head, body, and grip to be inserted into the pedestal. Furthermore, its body is squarely trimmed and its surface has been smoothed enough to carve characters. The Ji'an Koguryo Stele therefore has the conventional look of a tombstone.<sup>2</sup> Although it is still not clear as to exactly when the Ji'an Koguryo Stele was produced, its date is thought to be not far from when the Gwanggaeto Stele was erected. This supports the conclusion that those who created the Gwanggaeto Stele deliberately chose not to follow the standardized form of tombstones.

Why, then, did King Jangsu choose to have such a huge monument shaped uniquely rather than follow a common style? Returning to the Wuzi bei, that stele stands within the boundaries of the Qianling mausoleum, meaning that it was a monument belonging to the tomb. However, despite the presence of several royal tombs nearby, it is difficult to determine to which of them the Gwanggaeto Stele belongs. Given this fact, the tombstone is regarded as an independent monument without an affiliation to any particular tomb. The tombstone stands in the last district of a complex of royal tombs. The erection of the Gwanggaeto Stele marked the completion of that royal tombs complex at Koguryo's second capital, Gungnae Fortress (國內城), in present-day Ji'an. Its location and the time of its construction demonstrate the closing of an era. These conditions seem to represent how King Jangsu used the unique appearance of the tombstone as a means to highlight what was written on it and to solemnly declare the establishment of a new national order.

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<sup>2</sup> Though it has not yet been discovered, the monument tombstone's root-like grip implies that it had a pedestal at first.

## 2. The Ancient Northeast Asian World's Historical Perspective in the Epitaph

The Gwanggaeto Stele inscription is largely comprised of three parts. The second part chronicles King Gwanggaeto's achievements of conquest. This is also the lengthiest part and covers various powers surrounding Koguryo as targets of the king's military accomplishments. Among those powers mentioned are Wa (倭) of the Japanese archipelago, Baekje (百濟) and Silla (新羅) in the south-central part of the Korean Peninsula, Eastern Buyeo (東夫餘), and the Paeryeo (稗麗) and Baeksin (帛愼) tribes. While some may find the inclusion of Wa intriguing, it should be kept in mind that Wa was recorded not because it had a significant influence, but because it could be used as a tool to highlight the king's accomplishments.

The Paeryeo mentioned in the inscription refers to a nomadic Khitan (契丹) tribe, which had recently debuted in historical records.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the territory of Koguryo spread across the northern part of the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria, with the Liao River (遼河) as its western boundary. According to the inscription, the king crossed the Liao River, conquered Paeryeo at the Xilamulun River (西刺木倫河), and made a triumphant return with many trophies in 395. In other words, although there is no such indication in other historical records, the inscription informs that Koguryo had participated in talks with Khitan, which was gaining power to the west of the Liao River. Securing Khitan, a major power in the ancient Liaoxi (遼西) region, was regarded by most of the powers that had attempted to advance into this region as a starting point in governing the area. This also applied to the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐)

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<sup>3</sup> The *Book of Wei* (魏書) notes that when the Emperor Taizu (太祖) of Northern Wei (北魏) attacked Kumoxi (庫莫奚) in 388, he also defeated the Khitan, which was to east of Kumoxi. However, given that the Khitan thereafter continued to remain as a collectivity of several tribes, the inscription of the Gwanggaeto Stele offers a more detailed description involving the presence of the Paeryeo tribe.

dynasties later. King Gwanggaeto's expedition to Paeryeo demonstrates that Koguryo had advanced into the Liaoxi region since the fourth century. Here lies a clue as to why Koguryo became an obstacle to the Sui dynasty's expansion into the Liaoxi region at the end of the sixth century.

Meanwhile, the Liao River at that time could not yet be considered as the territory of Koguryo. Koguryo was battling with the Later Yan (後燕) to the west in order to occupy the Liao River's eastern side. This implies that the Koguryo king's expedition to Paeryeo would have been unable to use the route passing through Liucheng (柳城), which was the Later Yan's base point in Liaoxi and what is now Chaoyang (朝陽), and heading north thereafter toward the Xilamulun River. However, the history of exchange in ancient Northeast Asia shows that by traveling upstream along the west of the Liao River, it was possible to cross the northern part of Liaoxi as well as the Xilamulun River, leading to the world of nomads in the north. This suggests that in order to attack Paeryeo, the Koguryo army partially used the "Steppe Roads" connecting the northern part of the Liaoxi region with the northern nomadic region.

The understanding of ancient Northeast Asia is largely based on what is written in Chinese historical records. However, due to the nature of these historical records centering their description around the Chinese dynasties, coverage of historical perspectives in ancient Northeast Asia is extremely limited. In this regard, the account of the Paeryeo expedition in the tombstone's inscription provides invaluable information showing that the Liaoxi was a geopolitically important region where Koguryo, the northern nomadic tribes and Chinese powers, the three axes of ancient Northeast Asia, encountered one another.

The inscription also conveys the reality of specific relations in the region. For example, from the Han (漢) dynasty on, Liaodong (遼東) served as a pivot to Chinese dynasties for advancing into the east. Therefore, studying political and military developments that took place in Liaodong becomes critical to understanding international political situations in ancient Northeast Asia. Regarding this, the tombstone

inscription lists several locations the king passed on his way back to Koguryo after defeating Paeryeo. Interestingly, this triumphal parade did not cover Xiangping (襄平), which is modern Liaoyang (遼陽), or Ping Guo (平郭), which is modern Gaizhou (蓋州). If Koguryo had already conquered the Liaodong area, these two locations could not but be part of the expedition's route home. Hence, the inscription hints that the Later Yan had lost its bases in Liaodong one after another from Koguryo's intensive attacks and had been driven into a corner of the Liao River by 395.

### **3. Another Investiture-Tributary Relationship: Subject Peoples (屬民)**

Seen from East Asian history, the Gwanggaeto Stele is significant for demonstrating the existence of a “regional world” formed around Koguryo. That is, the inscription presumes that the powers in the area surrounding Koguryo are members of a world led by Koguryo and explains that such powers therefore became targets for King Gwanggaeto to conquer.

The inscription explains that Koguryo went on a conquest of Eastern Buyeo because they discontinued paying tribute to Koguryo, which had been their duty as “subject people” (屬民). The same explanation is applied to King Gwanggaeto's expedition to Baekje as it describes the people of Baekje who went from being subjects of Koguryo to those of Wa (倭). The term “subject people” in the inscription refers to targets of conquest, meaning they were subjects of Koguryo. Not only the people of Eastern Buyeo and Baekje, but also those of Silla, Paeryeo, and Baekje were subject people, as they too had become the targets of King Gwanggaeto's expedition.

Besides the term “subject people,” the mention of “tribute” (朝貢) while describing the relationships Koguryo had with its surrounding

powers reveals that they were all part of a world of their own. It is well-known that a tribute was a kind of ritual found in international relations in East Asia where the ruler of a vassal state regularly visits its suzerain state (宗主國) to offer the vassal state's local specialties as a tribute, thereby reaffirming the hierarchical, bilateral relationship. Thus, although the inscription uses the somewhat unfamiliar term "subject people," the relations between Koguryo and its subject people described in the inscription is very similar to the "investiture-tributary relations" (冊封朝貢關係) often found in East Asian international relations.

It is also worth taking note of the inscription defining the military actions of King Gwanggaeto as "suppression" (討伐). The term suppression signifies inevitable military action aimed at redressing a counterpart's unlawful acts. In other words, the inscription infers that Eastern Buyeo discontinuing tributary payment or Baekje becoming a subject of Wa were unlawful acts which inevitably required military action like the Koguryo king's use of suppression to rectify such acts. This perspective accordingly projects a world consisting of the suzerain state Koguryo and the subject people who belong to Koguryo.

Meanwhile, there is also the question of why the inscription places weight upon Wa. It would be insufficient to interpret the inscription's inclusion of Wa as a recognition of it as a strong power at that time. The reason why the inscription mentions Wa should be understood within the inscription's logical context. The Koguryo king embarked upon a suppression of Baekje because Baekje had turned from being a subject of Koguryo to being a subject of Wa. The reason Koguryo came to Silla's rescue was because Wa attacked Silla, a vassal state of Koguryo, in an attempt to acquire Silla as its own subject. In either case, Wa is portrayed in the inscription as a state seeking to disturb the relations between Koguryo and its subject people. Hence, Wa was not a vassal state or a potential target for subjugation, but an external influence outside the Koguryo-centered world seeking opportunities to interfere. According to the inscription's logic, Koguryo had a duty to maintain the world order

and rectify any acts undermining that world's peace and safety. Under these circumstances, the existence of Wa was highlighted in the inscription in order to glorify the Koguryo king's military achievements in protecting the Koguryo-centered world order. Therefore, Wa's influence in the inscription may be considered a deliberate exaggeration, notwithstanding its actual presence.

As explained above, it is clear that the regional world described in the inscription reflects Koguryo's unilateral, self-centered perspective. However, it would not be appropriate to deem that as pure fiction. This is because the description of Baekje's pledge to pay tribute and swear obedience to Koguryo shows that, although temporarily, Baekje did in fact recognize itself as a subject people of Koguryo. The Koguryo-centered international order displays some aspects, such as tribute or suppression, which must have been derived from the logic of investiture-tributary relations. What, then, did Koguryo accommodate and assimilate through such an order? This could be better determined in the future through a review of cases in which the Koguryo-centered regional world transformed influences it received from the Sino-centric world order to meet its own needs.

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