

Research Trends on Tomb Guards in the Inscriptions of the Gwanggaeto and Koguryo Stelae in Ji'an

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1. Introduction

Not only in Korea, but also in China and Japan, there was a system for placing *sumyoin*, or tomb guards (守墓人), to maintain royal mausoleums. Documentation on early Korea mentions that after a king or high-ranking aristocrat passed away, guards were assigned to their tombs in the kingdoms of Koguryo and Silla. The term *sumyoin* literally refers to those who guarded and cleaned tombs. They were in charge of cleaning and maintaining the entire mausoleum as well as its facilities, and also were responsible for conducting ancestral rites. Descriptions on tomb guards occupy more than one-third of the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription.

In the morning of July 29, 2012, Ma Shaobin (馬紹彬), a resident of Maxian village (馬線鄉), in Ji'an (集安), Jilin Province (吉林省), in the People's Republic of China, found a Koguryo-era stele about 100 meters from an old bridge across the Maxian River (麻線河). This stele, too, contains descriptions of tomb guards. The new discovery of a tombstone with inscriptions regarding the management of royal tombs immediately attracted international attention, especially within the Korean

academic society where there have been discussions regarding descriptions concerning tomb guards in the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription. This presentation shall introduce research trends on Koguryo-era tomb guards among South Korean scholars.

2. The Ji'an Koguryo Stele and the Gwanggaeto Stele

The Ji'an Koguryo Stele is a granite tombstone standing 173 centimeters tall, 60.6 to 66.5 centimeters wide and 12.5 to 21 centimeters in thickness, and weighing 464.5 kilograms. Out of a total of 218 characters inscribed on the front face, 156 characters are decipherable. Though slightly chipped on its upper right corner, the stele does not seem to have been moved far from its original position, given its size, weight, and the degree of abrasion to the broken areas. There are numerous tombs from the Koguryo era in the Maxian area where the stele was found, including royal tombs. Among those royal tombs are Cheonchuchong (千秋塚 Tomb of One Thousand Autumns) about 450 meters northwest from where the stele was found, and Seodaemyo (西大墓 Great Western Tomb) and the Maxian tomb no. 2100, which are approximately 1,150 meters east and 650 meters southwest, respectively, from where the stele was found. For being the nearest tomb, some scholars believe that the stele belonged to Cheonchuchong. However, considering the Maxian River's location, the locations of the nearby old tombs and the distance from those tombs to where the stele was found, it is unlikely that the stele belonged to one particular tomb.

The inscription on the Ji'an Koguryo Stele explains that Koguryo was founded by King Chumo and has been sustained by his descendants. The text subsequently describes that tomb guards of royal tombs have conducted ancestral rites in all seasons throughout the year in the river's downstream area. It also states that according to rules on guarding tombs, the guards were to clean and maintain tombstones erected at the tombs of late kings, and mentions that such tomb guards had been traded by the

rich. According to the inscription, the names of twenty heads of tomb guardian households had been inscribed to make them known to their descendants so to thereafter prohibit tomb guards from being traded, even by the rich, and those who violated this ban would be subject to punishment.

The Gwanggaeto Stele was erected by King Jangsu in 414, two years after the death of his father King Gwanggaeto. It seems that King Jangsu erected the tombstone upon completing his three-year mourning and official burial of his father. With Yushan (禹山), where many royal tombs are concentrated, to its back and the Yalu River to its front, the Gwanggaeto Stele stands leaning about 45 degrees eastward in a southeastern direction. Many tombs of varying sizes are dispersed around the tombstone. The most notable among them are Taewangreung (太王陵 Tomb of the Great King) which is about 360 meters southwest from the stele, and Janggunchong (將軍塚 Tomb of the General), which is about two kilometers northeast from the stele. Janggunchong, the Gwanggaeto stele, and Taewangreung are aligned straight in a southwest direction. Now designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Gwanggaeto Stele is protected by a transparent cover, which was reconstructed in 2003. The stele is 6.39 meters tall and weighs around 34-37 tons. Made from welded dacitic lapilli-tuff with tiny pebbles embedded on parts of its surface, the barely trimmed stele resembles a natural rock, adding a more sacred and arcane touch to this huge dark-grey tombstone.

The content of the inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele is largely divided into three parts. The first part provides the founding myth of Koguryo and the royal family genealogy. This part briefly describes the founding of the country, the succession to the throne from King Chumo to King Yuryu and King Daejoryu, and the life history of King Gwanggaeto. The second part chronicles King Gwanggaeto's activities of conquest and the subsequent accomplishments after his enthronement. Finally, the third part treats the tomb guards.

The first paragraph of the third part begins with the term *sumyoin*

yeonho (tomb guardian households), and specifies which region and what form of household the 330 men each were selected from. This is followed by the record of an order made by King Gwanggaeto during his reign: “In the reigns of preceding kings, local people residing nearby were chosen to clean and maintain tombs. However, I am concerned that such people may grow weak. Thus, in order to ensure that the management of tombs are maintained for as many as 10,000 years after my death, I hereby order to assign the cleaning and maintenance of tombs to those among *sinraehanye* (新來韓滅), the people from the Han (韓) and Ye (穢) tribes whom I brought over.” The inscription explains that following the order of King Gwanggaeto, 220 families were selected from the Han and Ye tribes, while 110 families were additionally chosen from the local people out of the concern that the newly assigned people might have difficulties in learning tomb maintenance rules. Subsequently, the previously and newly assigned families totaling 330 were reassigned so that 30 of them were designated as *gukyeon* (國烟) and the remaining 300 became *ganyeon* (看烟). The inscription thereafter reads “As tombstones have not been erected for tombs since the ancestor king, tomb guard families became disorganized. [However,] only the Great King Gwanggaeto (國岡上廣開土境好太王) erected a tombstone upon the ancestor king’s tomb and inscribed the record of tomb guard families to prevent confusion.” The closing paragraph states that “tomb guards are prohibited from being traded, so that even those who have wealth and power cannot buy them. And should anyone violate this order, those who sold shall be punished and those who purchased shall serve as tomb guards.”

As such, the Ji’an Koguryo stele and the Gwanggaeto Stele are closely related through this content on royal tomb guards. The discovery of the Ji’an Koguryo Stele was thus expected to answer many questions regarding the tomb guard system, but contrary to such expectations, it has added new controversies.

3. Discussion of the Koguryo-era Tomb Guards

Since the Gwanggaeto Stele was re-discovered in the 1880s, research on the stele's inscription has largely been focused on the mention of what happened in the *sinmyo* (辛卯) year 391. However, increasing interest in the social history of Koguryo since the mid-1980s has encouraged further studies on tomb guards. Such studies significantly stimulated historical research on Koguryo as they allowed researchers to explore diverse areas beyond the tomb guard system, such as Koguryo's society, culture, and politics in the fourth and fifth centuries. However, the lack of sources for researching the tomb guard system led to differing interpretations among scholars over the system's various aspects. The discovery of the Ji'an Koguryo Stele therefore raised expectations among many scholars that the tombstone would provide clarifications. Unfortunately, the content of the Ji'an Koguryo Stele text was less diverse than many scholars had hoped. The stele was erected primarily to warn that the trading of tomb guards would be strictly punished. It also remains uncertain as to when this tombstone was erected. Moreover, a new entity called "Yeonhodu" (烟戶頭), which is not mentioned in the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription, appears in this stele text. Thus, the excavation of the Ji'an Koguryo Stele added further complexity to discussions of tomb guards.

According to the Gwanggaeto Stele's description, tomb guards were recruited in units of *ga* (家 household) or *yeonho* (烟戶 household-based unit). Tomb guard families were comprised of the two groups each called *gumin* (舊民), the previously subjected people, and *sinraehanye* (新來韓滅), the newly subjected people from the Han and Ye tribes. In addition, tomb guard families were classified into *gukyeon* and *ganyeon*. The Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription explains that there were 10 households designated as *gukyeon* and 100 households as *ganyeon* among the 110 previously subjected households, while among the 220 newly subjected families, 20 households became *gukyeon* and 200 households became *ganyeon*. Out of the total of 330 recruited households, the ratio between

gumin and *sinraehanye* was 1:2, and the ratio between *gukyeon* and *ganyeon* was 1:10.

In Korean academia, the tomb guardian households inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele have been discussed in terms of their organization, characteristics, social status, and arrangement of their work units. The discussion that has gained foremost attention is that about *gukyeon* and *ganyeon*. Interpretations offered regarding the two terms include: ① *gukyeon* referred to tomb guard managers, while normal workers were referred to as *ganyeon*; ② *gukyeon* referred to those who moved to the old Koguryo capital of Gungnae Fortress and served as tomb guards, while *ganyeon* referred to those who provided necessary resources for the guarding of tombs from other areas; ③ *gukyeon* indicated tomb guards deployed at the King Gwanggaeto tomb, while *ganyeon* indicated guards dispatched to other royal tombs located at Gungnae Fortress; and ④ both *gukyeon* and *ganyeon* took turns in going to Gungnae Fortress to serve as tomb guards for three years each.

Opinions differ regarding the social status of tomb guards depending on where their residence was based. There are broadly two interpretations. One interpretation understands them to have been migrants who permanently resettled in Ji'an to manage the royal tombs. The other acknowledges them to have normally resided in their original towns and temporarily re-located to the capital in Ji'an to carry out their duties. The interpretation of permanent migration diverges into two different opinions with one considering the social status of tomb guards as slaves. The other opinion regards tomb guards to have belonged to a status lower than free commoners (良人) and were a group with a special mission (特殊職役人集團) that was under the direct control of state agencies and to have inherited the duty of tomb maintenance. The interpretation of temporary relocation, on the other hand, postulates the status of tomb guards to have been equal to free commoners.

The argument for considering tomb guards as slaves is based on two points. One is that tomb guardian households all were people who had

become subjects of Koguryo. The newly subjected *sinraehanye* referred to those who were subjugated from the regions conquered by King Gwanggaeto, while the previously subjected people were from the areas conquered before King Gwanggaeto's reign. The other point is that tomb guards had been objects for sale, which the inscriptions of the Gwanggaeto Stele and the Ji'an Koguryo Stele both state. Meanwhile, the argument for considering them as free commoners is based on the fact that they were described in units called a family unit or a household-based unit, which means that they lived in units of families. Further, tomb guards were also allowed to account for their own finances (自己經理), and their personal safety was guaranteed by the prohibition against trading tomb guards.

Given that they were recruited by household, that they were able to preserve their families regardless of having been recruited from subjected tribes, and that trading tomb guards was originally prohibited, it is difficult to assume that tomb guards were slaves. Nevertheless, the inscriptions on the Gwanggaeto Stele and the Ji'an Koguryo Stele both end with rules of punishment for violating the prohibition against trading tomb guards. This demonstrates that trading tomb guards occurred at that time, which then makes it equally difficult to consider tomb guards as free commoners taking turns to provide mandatory labor, in their cases in the form of tomb maintenance. Thus, it seems valid to conclude based upon available historical sources that tomb guards were not slaves, but people who belonged to a social class lower than commoners residing in naturally established villages, and that tomb guards were recruited in units of households to be relocated and collectively settled in the capital to serve for generations as tomb guards. The Ji'an Koguryo Stele's inscription further introduces the new term *yeonhodu*. Some scholars understand *yeonhodu* as the head of a tomb guardian household, while others see it as the head of all tomb guards, who may therefore also be referred to as *gukyeon*.

4. Conclusion

The Gwanggaeto Stele and the Ji'an Koguryo Stele show that Koguryo created and enacted laws against the rich trading tomb guards who were in charge of cleaning and managing royal tombs as well as conducting memorial services in the fourth and fifth centuries when this surfaced as an important issue. Regarding the tomb maintenance system of Koguryo, Korean academia has up until now been divided in terms of whether tombstones were erected with descriptions of royal tomb maintenance during the reign of King Gwanggaeto, exactly when the tomb guard system and relevant laws were established, how *gukyeon* and *ganyeon* differed, where the 330 tomb guard families inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele were affiliated, and how the labor required for tomb maintenance was assigned into units. The recent discovery of the Ji'an Koguryo Stele was expected to answer many of these issues. However, as scholarly opinions turned out to vary over multiple aspects, such as when the tombstone was erected, the nature of *yeonhodu*, to where the tombstone belonged, and when the tomb guard system was revised, debate regarding Koguryo's tomb guard system is likely to continue.

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