

What Stelae Reveal about Koguryo's Written Culture

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1. Introduction

According to *Samguk sagi* (三國史記 History of the Three Kingdoms), Koguryo compiled the history book *Yugi* (留記) soon after the country's foundation, and the second ruler King Yuri (瑠璃王) wrote a poem titled *Hwangjoga* (黃鳥歌 Song of the Yellow Bird) in Chinese. Koguryo's third ruler King Daemushin (大武神王) used documents (文書) as a tool in negotiations while at war with the governor of Liaodong, and the sixth ruler King Taejo (太祖王) left a stele inscribed with his accomplishments before returning from his patrol of fortresses at the kingdom's eastern frontier.

After the fourth century, Koguryo made use of writing to carry out policies, for instance, to proclaim laws and regulations, to establish the national educational institute Taehak (太學) and private schools called Gyeongdang (庠堂), to extensively erect royal tombstones. Actual examples that the Koguryo society used writing may be seen through texts such as stelae (石碑), seals (印章), inscriptions on stones (刻石), metal crafts (金屬器銘), the haloes of Buddhist statues (佛像 光背銘), roof-end tiles (瓦), bricks (埴), earthenware (土器銘), murals of ancient tombs (古墳

壁畫), and ink wash paintings (墨書). All of these historical records and relics allow us to understand how Koguryo used the culture of writing in consolidating its state system. Hence, this paper will explore the characteristics of Koguryo's culture of writing, particularly through stelae from the Koguryo period and their forms.

2. Shapes of Koguryo Stelae

Three stelae from the Koguryo period have so far been discovered. The Gwanggaeto Stele became known in the late nineteenth century in Ji'an, in China's Jilin province. Then in 1979, a Koguryo-era stele was found in Chungju, part of South Korea's North Chungcheong province. Most recently, in 2012 another Koguryo-era stele was excavated again in Ji'an,

China, making it possible to compare the different forms of the three stelae and explore the development of Koguryo's written culture.

The inscription on the Gwanggaeto Stele reads, "As tombstones have not been erected at tombs since the ancestor king(s), tomb guard families have become disorganized and confused. The Great King Gwanggaeto (國岡上廣開土境好太王) thereupon erected tombstones at the tomb(s) of ancestor king(s) and inscribed on each a record of the tomb's guardian family to prevent

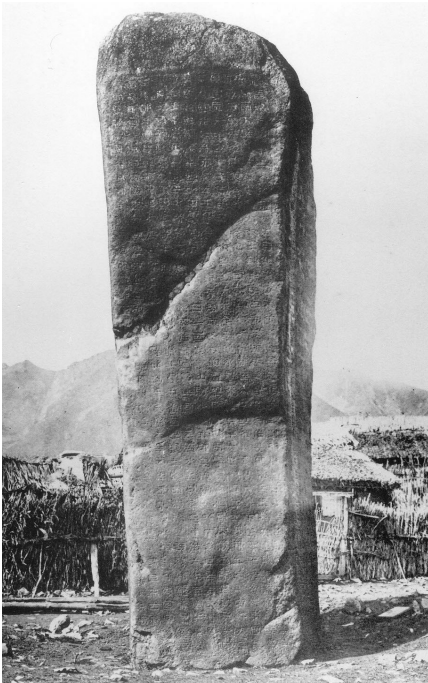


Figure 1. Gwanggaeto Stele

misidentifications.” This shows that there were no tombstones for royal tombs in Koguryo, but during the reign of King Gwanggaeto, tombstones with inscriptions listing tomb guards began to be erected in order to complement the existing tomb maintenance system.

Ji’an, China, where the Gwanggaeto Stele stands, has gained further attention since a stone monument was recently discovered near the Maseon River (麻線河). Called the Ji’an Koguryo Stele (集安高句麗碑), the monument is 173 centimeters in height, 60.6-66.5 centimeters in width, 12.5-21 centimeters in thickness, and 464.5 kilograms in weight. The stele’s body is flat on its front and back with a triangular head and a protruding bottom part made so that it may be inserted to stand upon a pedestal. Tombstones with this style of head and body were popular in the Han, Wei, and Jin (漢魏晉) periods in China. It seems that Koguryo emulated this Chinese style when new forms of tombstones were first being designed.

King Jangsu (長壽王), who succeeded his father King Gwanggaeto, erected a stele two years after his father’s death in 414 to commemorate his father’s accomplishments. That stele is now known as the Gwanggaeto Stele. It stands 6.39 meters tall with irregular widths from between 1.3 meters to 2 meters on each side and weighs approximately 40 tons. Made of tuff, a kind of volcanic rock, the stele’s overall shape of a huge stone pillar resembles that of a natural rock. Such tombstones erected by



Figure 2. Ji’an Koguryo Stele



Figure 3. Chungju Koguryo Stele

King Gwanggaeto and King Jangsu violated the policy strictly prohibiting the erection of tombstones in central China, which demonstrates that Koguryo had independently made policy decisions at the time. This stone pillar style can also be found in the Chungju Koguryo Stele (忠州高句麗碑) discovered in what once was the southernmost part of Koguryo territory, which had been incorporated through King Jangsu's southward expansion policy. This 126-144 centimeter tall and 31-55 centimeter wide stele looks like a square pillar

with each side irregularly shaped. The stele's resemblance to the Gwanggaeto Stele is close enough to deem it a miniature. These common features of the two tombstones erected in different areas throughout a certain interval illustrate that the form of tombstones had become stylized in Koguryo society.

What, then, is the origin of this natural rock-like stone pillar style? It is well-known that megalithic cultures of erecting stone pillars to pass down certain messages had been traditionally present in ancient Northeast Asian countries and steppe empires. A number of erected stones serving as milestones are still found in Korea and in the Mongolian region, and scholars have noted the similarity in their appearances with the Gwanggaeto Stele. More recently, some researchers have speculated that the Gwanggaeto Stele was made out of a sacred stone people used to worship. This theory can be given some credence since it is more than

likely that a huge stone could have been placed at a good position overlooking royal tombs so as to especially publicize the accomplishments of King Gwanggaeto and proclaim laws regarding the tomb guard system, which was an issue in Koguryo society at that time.

The Gwanggaeto Stele's somewhat unusual and unique appearance can be considered as a turning point that enabled the diversification of stele appearances later in Koguryo. Such a premise is supported by the fact that even more uniquely shaped tombstones emerged together with a change in the architectural style of tombs after the fifth century. So far, three tombstone relics have been found from Koguryo-era stone chamber tombs covered with earth mounds. These relics were discovered at Ji'an from the Sanseongha ancient tomb no. M1411, the Usanha ancient tomb no. M1080, and in between the Sahoe ancient tombs (four tumuli 四盃墳) no. 2 and no. 3. Given that pedestals still remain intact atop the earth mounds of Sahoe ancient tombs no. 1, no. 2, and no. 3, many more tombstones must have been erected. These tombstones seem to have absorbed considerable damage from wind and rain, although they originally seem to have had no inscriptions on them.

This unique Myosangibbi (墓上立碑) style of Koguryo tombs topped with tombstones seems to reflect a structural modification of stone-piled tiered tombs. A number of high-quality construction materials such as roof tiles and bricks have been discovered at tombs of this style, including at Seodaemyo (西大墓), Chunchuchong (千秋塚), and Taewangreung (太王陵) in Ji'an, which are presumed to be royal tombs. Furthermore, on the top part of the tomb Janggunchong (將軍塚), which is considered to have been constructed later than the aforementioned tombs, there are holes about 10 centimeters in diameter born into it at regular intervals and these seem to be traces of a certain structure's pillars. The stone-piled tiered tombs' tradition of building structures on top seems to have become difficult to preserve as stone chamber tombs with earth mounds gradually emerged as the new construction style for tombs in Koguryo after the capital's relocation to Pyongyang. It has been understood that with such a

change, tombstones were erected to replace what naturally and customarily used to be on top of tombs.

3. Calligraphic Style of the Koguryo Period

Analyses on hand-written documents from the Koguryo era show that in terms of calligraphic style, clerical script (隸書) experienced a gradual decline as opposed to increased use of the new clerical script (新隸體) after the fourth century, during which the semi-cursive script (行書) evolved and the regular script (楷書) matured, as well. A similar change and evolution of calligraphic styles also took place in China throughout the Eastern Jin and the period of the Southern and Northern dynasties (東晉南北朝). This shows that the overall development of calligraphic styles in Koguryo did not differ much from that in central China. The written culture of Koguryo indicates that it developed some unique features as it followed the general trend of written culture based on Chinese characters in East Asia. A representative example can be found in the calligraphic style of the Gwanggaeto Stele constructed in the fifth century.

Since the Gwanggaeto Stele's rediscovery, various assessments have been made to define the stele inscription's calligraphic style. Among those are the old clerical script (古隸), Han clerical script (漢隸), clerical official script (八分), half-clerical, half-regular script (隸楷之間), regular script (真書), Eastern Jin clerical script (東晉隸書), clerical script (隸書), old stone inscription script (舊體銘石書), official state script for rituals (儀式用國定書體), Koguryo official script (高句麗官方書體), Gwanggaeto Stele script (廣開土太王碑體), and Koguryo script (高句麗體). The reason why opinions have differed so much among scholars regarding the inscription's calligraphic style is because it is difficult to appropriately identify the features of characters through conventional methods of classification.

Names of scripts have changed over time depending on their purpose, the material on which a script was written, and a writer's

personal character. For example, inscriptions on bones and tortoise carapaces were classified as oracle bone script (甲骨文), and inscriptions on bells and cauldrons as bronze ware script (鐘鼎文 or 金文), all after the material upon which inscriptions were carved. Regular script (楷書) used to be called the Wei tablet script (魏碑體) during the Northern Wei (北魏) era for being used on tombstones or tombs. Calligraphic styles reflecting a particular writer's distinctive characteristics or artistry include Ouyang script (歐體), Yan script (顏體), and Chusa script (秋史體), respectively named after the calligraphers Ouyang Xun (歐陽詢), Yan Zhenqing (顏真卿), and Kim Jeong-hui (金正喜), whose pseudonym was Chusa (秋史).

At this point, it may be worth considering what to call the Gwanggaeto Stele inscription's calligraphic style. Rather than identifying the style as old clerical script (古隸) or clerical official script (八分), it would be safer to take into account the shape and configuration of characters inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele. This would classify it as clerical script (隸書), which embodies both the old clerical and the clerical official script. However, considering the artistry the Gwanggaeto Stele embodies as well as what the tombstone especially meant to the Koguryo society at the time, it might be more reasonable to settle for a more idiosyncratic name for the inscription's calligraphic style, such as the "Gwanggaeto Stele script."

For the inscription's purpose, the "Gwanggaeto Stele



Figure 4. Rubbed copy of the Gwanggaeto Stele's inscription from the collection of Mizutani Teijirō (Middle of the second page)

script” could be classified as a stone inscription script. In this sense, Koguryo had been developing its own unique stone inscription scripts such as the Gwanggaeto Stele script while the clerical official script (八分) was generally being used for stone inscriptions in central China during the Wei and Jin periods. The new clerical script (新隸體) chiefly found in roof tile inscriptions from the first half of the fourth century seems to have had a certain influence over the creation of Koguryo-style inscription scripts. The calligraphic style of inscriptions found in the Chunchuchong and Taewangreung stelae displays an adaptation of an old style of character shapes and configurations with straight-lined strokes, an overall appearance which closely resembles that of the Gwanggaeto Stele. Calligraphic styles of this type had already been invented by the Koguryo royal court to represent the authority and majesty of the royal tombs, even before inscriptions were carved on the Gwanggaeto Stele. The Gwanggaeto Stele script thereby emerged as an independent calligraphic style amid the inscription script’s development in Koguryo, and under the special circumstance of constructing a tombstone for the Great King Gwanggaeto (國置上廣開土境 平安好大王).



Figure 5. Rubbed copy of the inscription 'Gwanggaeto taewang' on a bronze bowl from Houchong Tomb

Once completely formed, the Gwanggaeto Stele script made a significant impact on Koguryo’s handwriting and scribal culture for a period of time. Inscriptions on bottles and bowls (壺杆) created in 415, one year later than the stele’s erection, were ritual tools used for memorial services for the late King Gwanggaeto. Although such bottles and bowls had been created with a variety of materials at different times,

the calligraphic style of inscriptions carved on them were similar to that of the Gwanggaeto Stele script. Moreover, the calligraphic style of a seal's inscription, estimated to have been created ten years later, around 423, is nearly similar to the Gwanggaeto Stele script's style. In the Wei and Jin periods, the seal script (篆書) was normally used for seals, making it extremely rare for clerical script (隸書) such as the Gwanggaeto Stele script to be used on seals. Given that inscriptions on official seals at Koguryo between the third and fourth century bore the seal script, the Gwanggaeto Stele script inscribed on a personal seal from around 423 can be considered evidence that the script had already been recognized as a common script that had grown out of its original official nature of commemorating the late king. Calligraphic styles tended to be chosen most conservatively for seals, so the fact that the Gwanggaeto Stele script had been applied to seals suggests that the script had firmly rooted itself in Koguryo by the early fifth century. It is this script, along with the Gwanggaeto Stele's unique pillar-shaped natural rock tombstone, that became carried over on to the Chungju Koguryo Stele and

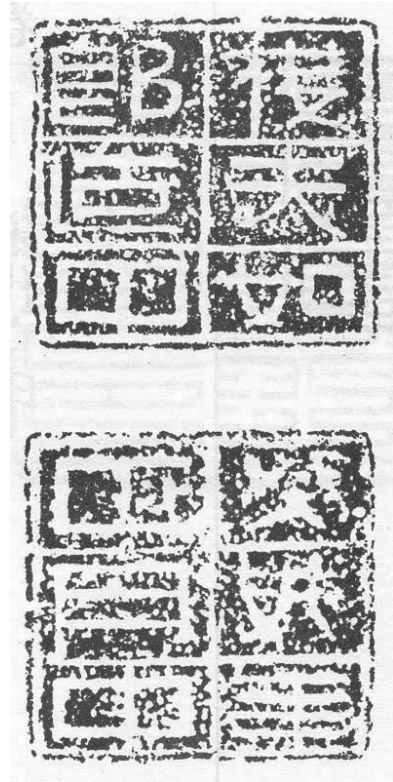


Figure 6. Rubbed copy of the inscription 'Gyehae-nyeon' [Year of Gyehae] on a seal from around the year 423

Source: Zhang Ying, *Jilin chutu gudai guanyin* [Ancient Seals Excavated from Jilin] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 7.

formed the key features of Koguryo's handwriting and scribal culture.

4. Conclusion

From the early days of its founding, Koguryo made active use of writing and had created by the fourth century tombstones and a written culture that were characteristically distinctive from those of central China. As inscribed on the Gwanggaeto Stele, Koguryo had promoted tombstone construction and accordingly erected the Gwanggaeto Stele during the reign of King Jangsu, contrary to the order prohibiting tombstones at that time in central China. The pillar-shaped tombstone mostly retains its natural rock-like form, displaying a unique, original style rarely found in central China. Furthermore, the characters inscribed on the stele, carved especially to commemorate the late king's great accomplishments, demonstrate the creation of a calligraphic style idiomatic enough to be named the Gwanggaeto Stele script. Thus, key features of Koguryo-era tombstones and written culture can be identified through the tombstone construction policy that King Gwanggaeto and King Jangsu independently adopted as well as through the advent of an original style of tombstones and calligraphy to which the Gwanggaeto Stele attests.

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