

Turkic Northern Tribes and Koguryo in the Early 650s: Reflection on the Circumstances of Koguryo Envoys in the Afrasiab

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Introduction

The Afrasiab palatial murals were discovered in 1965 during road construction at the palace site in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. There were two figures on one of the discovered murals, who wear hats decorated with two feathers and carry swords. They have been presumed to be ancient Korean envoys, but some questions still remain unanswered. Exactly where did they come from, and does the depiction represent historical facts?

Regarding the first question, I do believe that they were envoys from Koguryo. Nevertheless, I do not agree with those who propose the hypothesis that they were sent to Samarkand in Central Asia as its geopolitical strategy of fending off Tang. In order to substantiate the hypothesis, some doubts must be clarified. Is it probable that they may have traveled 8,000 kilometers from Koguryo's capital, Pyeongyang, to Samarkand? Allowing that there was a route through the Mongolian grasslands, it was far beyond the territory of Koguryo. Thus, traveling through the grasslands would have been almost impossible without any help from the outside. Furthermore, given the long distance of thousands of kilometers to Central Asian countries, the geopolitical benefits that Koguryo would have earned by establishing ties with them are questionable.

Concerning the second question, it has been generally assumed that

the mural depicts an actual event in Kangju which the Koguryo envoys attended. This assumption, however, does not fit with the entire context of the west wall of Afrasiab, on which the envoys from Koguryo and Tang are depicted together along with the Sogdian King Varkhuman and the Gokturks. Koguryo had been engaged in war with Tang since 645. Thus, it is implausible that envoys from two countries at war could have stood side by side in another country. There is a precedent against the assumption: A historical record vividly describes how perplexed and outraged Sui Emperor Yang was when he encountered envoys from Koguryo at the tent of Yami Khan of the Eastern Gokturk Khanate in 607.

With these doubts in mind, I shall examine the relations between Koguryo and Turkic northern tribes and attempt to clarify the circumstances in which Koguryo envoys were portrayed in one of the murals of Kangju.

Geopolitical Perspective

Koguryo's pursuit of coalitions with Turkic northern tribes to thwart the threat of Sui and Tang was one of the interesting facets of the geopolitics of the 6th and 7th centuries. In this light, the Koguryo envoys in the Afrasiab mural have been regarded as evidence that Koguryo's diplomatic efforts extended even to Central Asia. Emphasising Koguryo's diplomatic influence extending to Central Asia, however, this line of interpretation fails to answer the following questions: what strategy did Koguryo have in mind when it extended diplomatic relations to Central Asian states, and was it truly possible to send envoys that far? Koguryo's preceding coalition attempt with Turkic northern tribes provides clues to these questions.

The Xueyantuo, one of the Tiele tribes, became the new power of the northern nomadic tribes in place of the Eastern Gokturk Khanate, whose last ruler, Illig Khan, had been completely defeated by Tang. Koguryo reached out to the Xueyantuo. This alliance provides a good precedent for examining the relations between Koguryo and the Central Asian region.¹

¹ Refer to Lee Seong-je 李成制, "Koguryo-wa tureukeugye bukbangseryeo-ui gwangye: ihae-ui

The notable record on the contact between the Xue-Yantuo and Koguryo is found in “Beidi Zhuan”²: “Koguryo’s Makriji i.e., prime minister, then held by Yeongaesomun, secretly sent the Mohe people to Yi’nan, offering Zhenzhu Khan generous benefits, but Yi’nan did not dare to accept his suggestion of alliance [in fear of Tang’s wrath].” Koguryo moved to involve the Xueyantuo after its defeat by Tang in the battle of Mt. Zhubi. That is, only after being pushed to dire straits after a devastating defeat did Koguryo attempt to engage the Xueyantuo in its war with Tang. This indicates that forming an alliance with the Xueyantuo against Tang did not belong to the Koguryo’s initial plan: it was an expedient measure to extricate itself from an urgent situation rather than its long-planned strategy.

Koguryo’s attempt to engage the Xueyantuo in its war with Tang raises an important question regarding Koguryo’s relations with the Central Asian region: Would the strategy be effective in the geopolitical landscape of that time? Without answering this question, it is impossible to evaluate accurately the significance of Koguryo’s diplomatic efforts, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. In addition, Koguryo’s contact with the Xueyantuo gives hints on how Yeongaesomun’s message was delivered to Zhenzhu Khan in the grasslands of the upper Orkhon River. In this contact, he used the Mohe people as an intermediary agent, which casts doubt over whether Koguryo could send envoys directly to the grasslands in Mongolia. More than anything else, the fact that Koguryo employed the Mohe people as its intermediary agent suggests that Koguryo’s geographical scope for diplomatic missions was limited.

The above-mentioned scene in the Afrasiab murals has been generally presumed to be the depiction of an actual event in the early 650s. Then, the next question arises: Who might have come forward to assist Koguryo’s attempt of engaging Central Asia for its own interest? Recent studies

 banghyang-gwa yeongubangbeop-ui mosaek” 高句麗와 투르크계 북방세력의 관계-이해의 방향과 연구방법의 모색 [The relations between Koguryo and Turkic Northern Tribes: Approaches and Research Methods], *Koguryo Balhae Yeongu* 高句麗渤海研究 52 (2015).

² Beidi Zhuan [Communications of the Northern “Di” Barbarians], *Jiu Tang Shu* [The Old Book of Tang].

speculate that the Sogdians might have lent a hand to Koguryo with its attempt to expand its diplomatic influence to Central Asia across the Mongolian grasslands.

The Sogdians were an Iranian people living in Sogdiana, an oasis region encompassing parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and areas between the rivers of Amu Darya and Syr Darya. They were known for being merchants who played a central role in trade along the Silk Road, and their sphere of trading influence ranged throughout the Eurasian continent since the later Han period of China. If Koguryo people had hoped to obtain their assistance, they would have restrained themselves not to advance from the Mongolian steppe to Central Asia.

Moreover, the Sogdians were not an isolated force that existed outside the world order of that time. When the Eastern Gokturk Khanate was prevailing, the Sogdians placed themselves under the influence of the Eastern Gokturk Khanate. After its collapse, a large number of them surrendered to Tang. And those resorting to Tang were incorporated into Tang's government, with their chieftains turning into Tang's officials. Such transformations helped to facilitate their main business, trading activities. Considering such characteristics of the Sogdians, it is highly doubtful that they would have collaborated with Koguryo against Tang in an extremely dangerous expedition to traverse the entire east region of the Eurasian continent.

The Western Gokturk Khanate's Rise and Tang's Military Expedition

A series of massive attacks from Tang made the Xue-Yantuo collapse in 646 A.D. After the collapse of the Xueyantuo, the Western Gokturk Khanate ascended to a Turkic power competing with Tang. There had been a number of tribes fighting against Tang in the Mobei region. The Gokturks, one of the major tribes, had crossed the Altaic Mountains and established the Western Gokturk Khanate in the northwest of the Tianshan Mountains.

The chieftain of the Western Gokturks, Ashina Helu, was originally appointed Yaochi governor in the Protectorate of the Pacified West (i.e., Anxi Duhufu). After the death of Tang Emperor Taizong, however, he as-

sumed the position of Khan under the name of Ishbara Khan, unifying 10 family lineages of the Western Gokturks, and stood against Tang. The Western Gokturks, whose foothold was the basins of the Ili River and Issykkul Lake, rebelled against Tang, and many other tribes to the east of the Tian-shan Mountains joined them. To quash the rebellion, Tang deployed troops three times in the years 652, 655, and 657, and was finally able to capture, in 658, Ashina Helu in Shiguo (present-day Tashkent, Uzbekistan).

Here, given the Koguryo's failed experience to involve the Xueyantuo in its war against Tang, it is plausible that Koguryo might have regarded the Western Gokturk Khanate, a new anti-Tang power in the 650s, as a coalition partner for its anti-Tang diplomatic strategy. From this, it has been inferred that Koguryo sent envoys to the Western Gokturk Khanate and then to Kangju, present-day Samarkand, which was under the sphere of the Western Gokturks.

But, according to "Huihu Zhuan" (回鶻傳, Communications of Huihu), *Xin Tang Shu* (新唐書, The New Book of Tang), which relates Tang's subjugation of Ashina Helu, the Huihu (i.e., the Uyghurs), which had been strengthening their power in the Mongolian steppe after the collapse of the Xue-Yantuo, provided 50,000 troops for Tang's expeditionary forces. They also joined Tang's expedition in 657, defeating Ashina Helu and earned Tang's general-in-chief positions for its reward. In addition, the epitaph of Pugu Yitu (僕固乙突墓誌), the governor of Jin Weidu (金微都督), discovered in the Republic of Mongolia in 2009, shows that the Pugu tribe, one of the nine main Tiele tribes along with the Huihu, also joined the attack on Ashina Helu and contributed to Tang's victory. And after the defeat of the Xue-Yantuo, the Mongolian grasslands were occupied by the Tiele tribes, including the Huihu and the Pugu, all of which fell under Tang's control.

All these circumstances suggest that any diplomatic mission by Koguryo to go to the Western Gokturk Khanate through the Mongolian steppe would have been unavailable at that time. In the early 650s, the steppe was under Tang's rule, which had the power of mobilizing troops as large as 50,000 without much difficulty. Under such circumstances, it would have been difficult for Koguryo envoys to cross the steppe even if Koguryo had attempted to send them to the west.

The Koguryo Envoys in the Murals and the Worldview of the Gokturks

Now we must investigate the background of having the Koguryo envoys painted on the palatial murals of Kangju. I believe that the scene is not a factual depiction of Koguryo envoys visiting Samarkand, but an iconic image of the greatness of Koguryo.³ Previous studies speculate that the iconic image originating in Tang spread to Chang'an, then to Dunhuang, and finally to Samarkand. In this light, they assume that the placement of Koguryo envoys at the far right end of the painting is based on Tang's worldview that regarded Koguryo as a country located at the eastern end of the world.

The depiction of characters in the palatial murals can be assuredly regarded as a projection of the worldview and the geographical understanding that the Kangju people had. But is it true that the worldview of the Kangju people had originated from Tang? To examine that point, let us take a close look at the overall arrangement of figures in the entire west wall painting of Afrasiab: King Varkhuman is sitting on the top tier, surrounded by Gokturks; a line of people are waiting to submit their gifts at the mid-tier; and servants and foreign envoys from various countries, including those from Koguryo, are located at the bottom tier.

Interestingly, there is a noticeable contrast between the top tier of the king with the Gokturk people and the other tiers of Kangju people and foreign envoys. The scene of the top tier seems as if the Gokturks are looking over King Varkhuman's governance at his sides. This seems to have reflected the contemporary situation in which Kangju fell under the influence of the Western Gokturk Khanate. On the other hand, Tang's envoys are standing in line in order to offer tributes to the king. This portrayal seems

³ Kageyama Etsuko, "A Chinese way of Depicting Foreign Delegates Discerned in the Painting of Afrasiab," *Sutudia Iranica*, no. 25 (Paris, 2002); Jung Hosup 정호섭, "Jowugwan-ul sseun inmuldo-ui yuhyeong-gwa seonggyeok: oeguk jaryo-e natanan godae Hangukin-ui moseup-ul jungsim-euro" 鳥羽冠을 쓴 人物圖의 類型과 性格-외국 자료에 나타난 고대 한국인의 모습을 중심으로 [The Types and Characteristics of the Jowooguan-Wearing Figures: with a Focus on the Appearances of Ancient Koreans in Foreign Sources], *Yungnamhak* 嶺南學 24 (2013).



Figure 1. The Copy of the Restored West Wall Painting of Afrasiab Palace

to suggest that Tang did not yet exert a strong influence on Kangju.

Given my reading of the murals, where did the Kanju people's view of Koguryo come from? The origination of the view, I believe, can be found among the Gokturks. There is a Kultegin inscription, which reveals that the Gokturks shared the same view.

They (the lords) thus passed away (lit.: 'flew away to Tengri'). As mourners and laments there came from the east, the representatives of the people of the Böküli Čölüg (Koguryo), Tabγač (Chinese), Avar, Rome, Kirgiz, Uc-Quriqan, Otuz-Tatar, Qitan and Tatabi, this many people came and mourned and lamented.⁴

The inscription was on a Gokturk stele (erected in 732 A.D.), which was found at the bank of the Orkhon River in Mongolia. The Kultegin inscriptions relate the story of Kultegin, the most eminent leader in nomadic history. The above quoted text tells us of the funerals of his ancestors, most of which must have been held prior to the 8th century. Here "the east, from the place where the sun rises" refers to Koguryo, which indicates that the Gokturks also had the worldview that Koguryo was located in the eastern end of the world.

⁴ Talat Tekin, *Dolgwolbimun Yeongu* 돌궐비문연구 [Orhon Yazıtlar and Tunyukuk Yazıtı], Lee Yongseong 이용성, trans. (Seoul: J & C, 2008), 90.

The worldview in which Koguryo envoys could be placed at the east end of the wall and King Varkhuman in the front center where he presided over envoys, is very likely to have originated from the Western Gokturk people. This may imply a different origin of the Koguryo image. Previous studies have put emphasis on the Koguryo envoys' hats called *Jowooguan*, but not on their swords. In contrast, no Koguryo images from the Central Plain (i.e., Zhongyuan in China) have presented their swords as in the Samarkand palatial mural. In the paintings of foreign envoys at the Tomb of Prince Zhang Huai in the Tang era, Koguryo envoys respectfully hold their hands in front of them, while the Afrasiab mural portrays them as military men with their swords. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the Koguryo's image of military valor and strength had a different origin.

The Kultegin inscriptions refer to Koguryo as "Böküli." It is also mentioned in one of the inscriptions that when his ancestors were subordinated to China, they had the experience of taking the field to Böküli, the place from which the sun rose. In 551, the Gokturk troops attacked Shinseong (or Shin Fortress) and Baekamseong (or Baekam Fortress),⁵ and in the early 7th century, they traded with Koguryo. Furthermore, the Gokturks were mobilized in the battles against Koguryo at the demands of Sui and Tang. These historical facts indicate that interactions between the Gokturks and Koguryo were not temporary or one-dimensional.

Then, what view did the Gokturks come to have regarding Koguryo? It seems to have been more than the geographical viewpoint of it being a country at the east end, where the sun rose. To the Western Gokturk Khanate or Kangju in Central Asia, Tang's might arching over Central Asia must have been felt in their bones, but the tenacity of Koguryo, which had been thwarting a series of Tang attacks, might have seemed dazzling. If so, such impressive people may have deserved a place, along with Tang envoys, in the scene that expresses the glory of King Varkhuman's reign.

⁵ King Yangwon 陽原王, 7th year (551), *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 [The Chronicles of Three Kingdoms], vol. 19; "Wei Yunqi Zhuan" 韋雲起傳 [The Biography of Wei Yunqi], *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 [The Old Book of Tang], vol. 75.