

## A Review of *Kankoku kodai mokkan no kenkyū*

# The Life and Culture of Ancient Korea Recorded in the Wooden Strips

*Kankoku kodai mokkan no kenkyū* 韓国古代木簡の研究 [A Study of Ancient Korean Wooden Documents], by Hashimoto Shigeru 橋本繁. Tōkyō: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2014, 281 pp., ¥ 9,900, ISBN: 978-4-642-08152-8 (paperback)

## Introduction

The use of wooden documents (*mokkan*), or writing on slips or tablets of wood, is a culture shared across Korea, China, and Japan. Each country adopted and transformed this practice to suit its own needs and environment. This article will examine Hashimoto Shigeru's *Kankoku kodai mokkan no kenkyū* (*A Study of Ancient Korean Wooden Documents*) as part of the special review introducing Korean studies within Japan. My experience serving as an executive member of the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents (*Hanguk mokkan hakoe*) from 2008 to 2018 seems to have been why the editors considered this reviewer well informed of the general situation surrounding Korean wooden documents. The Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents also translates recent studies done in Japan and publishes them yearly in the Society's journal. My involvement in a large part of the translation may have been another reason this reviewer was judged more knowledgeable than others of recent research trends in Japan. Although it is not without some trepidation that I, as one of the newer members studying wooden documents, will be reviewing the work of a scholar who has long done research in this field, I hope my honest impression upon reading the book finds its way into this article.

## Review of Contents

Interest in wooden documents has grown and intensified in the Korean peninsula ever since they were excavated in 1978 from the site of Anapji,

Gyeongju. The Seongsan Fortress in Haman was built by using the leaf mat method that laid leaves or branches admixed with clay in the base layer, and many wooden documents were found to have been used in the process. The Gaya National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage began the excavation and research of the Haman Seongsan Fortress from 1991, which resulted in the largest number of wooden documents in the Korean peninsula being discovered from a single site.

The discovery also heightened interest in wooden documents of the Korean peninsula among Japanese scholars, leading to research and the co-authoring of publications on the subject in Japan. Researchers also engaged in scholarly exchange with the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents to gain a better understanding of wooden documents excavated in the Korean peninsula. It was within this context that Hashimoto Shigeru's book, *Kankoku kodai mokkan no kenkyū*, was published.

The book is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter deals with the wooden documents excavated from the Seongsan Fortress in Haman, the second chapter covers wooden documents with inscriptions from the *Analects of Confucius*, and the third chapter discusses wooden documents other than the previous two. Each chapter is further divided into two or three sections. Until this book was published in 2014, many research articles on wooden documents had been produced in the Korean peninsula; however, only three books on the subject had been published, indicating that the research had not yet lived up to its full potential. This book is therefore significant in its contribution to understanding wooden documents of the Korean peninsula.

## Review of Organization

The book's table of contents is as follows:

### Chapter 1. The Wooden Documents of the Seongsan Fortress in Haman

#### Section 1. Field Investigation of the Seongsan Fortress Wooden Documents

##### Introduction

1. Sharing Baseline Information
2. Achievements of the Co-investigation

##### Conclusion

### Section 2. Production Techniques of the Seongsan Fortress Wooden Documents

##### Introduction

1. Production Techniques of Wooden Documents
2. Traces of Usage

##### Conclusion

### Section 3. The Seongsan Fortress Wooden Documents and Local Rule by Silla during the 6<sup>th</sup> century

##### Introduction

1. Review of Previous Research on Wooden Document Production Sites
2. Local Characteristics as Seen through Forms of Inscription
3. Characteristics of Villages as Seen through Handwriting
4. Wooden Document Manufacturers in Counties

##### Conclusion

### Appendix. Research Trends

##### Introduction

1. Characteristics of Newly Discovered Wooden Documents
2. Recent Research Trends

Material 1. Deciphered Inscriptions of the Wooden Documents of Seongsan Fortress in Haman

Material 2. Classification Table

### Chapter 2. Wooden Documents with Inscriptions from the *Analects of Confucius*

#### Section 1. Wooden Documents with Inscriptions from the *Analects of Confucius* discovered in the Korean Peninsula and the Acceptance of Confucianism by Silla

##### Introduction

1. Overview of Excavation Sites and the Restoration of Wooden Documents
2. Hypothesized Usage
3. Studying the *Analects of Confucius* in Silla

##### Conclusion

#### Section 2. The Transmission of Written Culture in East Asia

## Introduction

1. Multisided Wooden Documents of China and the *Analects of Confucius*
2. Multisided Wooden Documents of Japan and the *Analects of Confucius*

## Conclusion

## Appendix

1. On Tomiya Itaru's Argument
2. Wooden Documents Inscribed with Songs and Wooden Documents with Inscriptions from the *Analects of Confucius*

## Conclusion

## Chapter 3. Other Wooden Documents

## Section 1. Wooden Documents of Anapji, Gyeongju, and the Palaces of Silla

## Introduction

1. Overview of Wooden Documents
2. Analysis of Contents of Inscriptions
3. Food Processing in the Palaces of Silla and Their Use

## Conclusion

## Section 2. Recently Excavated Wooden Documents

1. Wooden Documents of Ancestor Worship
2. Wooden Documents of Baekje
3. Wooden Documents Unearthed from the Sunken Ship of Goryeo

## Final section. The Expansion of Written Culture in East Asia

## Introduction

1. Local Societies and the Expansion of Written Culture
2. Expansion of Written Culture in East Asia

## Conclusion

Before reviewing the table of contents, I will first take a look at the wooden documents that have been unearthed throughout the Korean peninsula. The following table summarizes the wooden documents with ink inscriptions among those excavated in the Korean peninsula.

Excavation Site	Period	Number of Wooden Documents
Jeongbaek-dong, Pyeongyang	Lelang Commandary	2
Seogam-ri, Pyeongyang	Lelang Commandary	1
Baengnyeong Fortress, Geumsan	Baekje	1
Bogam-ri, Naju	Baekje	13
Gwanbuk-ri, Buyeo	Baekje	11
Gua-ri, Buyeo	Baekje	13
Gungnamji, Buyeo	Baekje	3
Neungsan-ri temple site, Buyeo	Baekje	34 (approximately 100 wooden document fragments)
Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo	Baekje	33
Wolseong Moat, Gyeongju	Silla	30
Acha Fortress, Seoul	Silla	1
Iseong Fortress, Hanam	Silla	13
Seongsan Fortress, Haman	Silla	245
Museum site, Gyeongju	Unified Silla	3
Anapji, Gyeongju	Unified Silla	61
Inyong temple site (presumed), Gyeongju	Unified Silla	1
Hwangnam-dong, Gyeongju	Unified Silla	3
Bonghwang-dong, Gimhae	Unified Silla	1
Mireuksa temple site, Iksan	Unified Silla	2
Gyeyang Fortress, Incheon	Unified Silla	2
Hwawang Fortress, Changnyeong	Unified Silla	7
Dongnam-ri, Buyeo	Unified Silla(?)/Baekje(?)	1
Bangu-dong, Ulsan	Unified Silla(?)/Goryeo(?)	1

The table above shows that the majority of wooden documents discovered as of 2019 are from Silla; as a result, they have been the subject of most of the research on wooden documents. This book also focuses particularly on the wooden documents unearthed from the Seongsan Fortress in Haman, the site from which the largest number of wooden documents was excavated, starting from Chapter 1. A great amount of interest in Seongsan Fortress was generated in both Korea and Japan, and Hashimoto, as a graduate of Waseda University,

likely had ample opportunity to study the wooden documents of Seongsan Fortress, since the Institute for Korean Studies of Waseda University had signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Gaya National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage which had led the site's excavation. This is evident from the first two sections of Chapter 1, which contain contents that cannot be accessed without the help of the Gaya National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage such as the scope of the excavation or the production techniques of the wooden documents. Section 3 of Chapter 1 deals with local rule during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, on which most of the recent research in the Korean peninsula on these wooden documents has been conducted. Hashimoto summarizes the basic facts and follows them by touching upon his opinion merely as one among many others, probably since he found it difficult to strongly assert his own argument.

Hashimoto also reviews the more recently discovered wooden documents of Seongsan Fortress in this process. The last part of Chapter 1 discusses recent research trends based on an updated summary of material available prior to the publication of this book in 2014. The previously published *Hanguk ui godae mokkan (Ancient Wooden Documents of Korea)* summarized the wooden documents discovered in Seongsan Fortress up to its publication in 2004. The Gaya National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage continued to investigate the Haman Seongsan Fortress site after that, resulting in the excavation of a large amount of wooden documents in 2006 and 2007. These findings were covered in a report titled *Haman Seongsan sanseong chulto mokkan (Wooden Documents Excavated from the Seongsan Fortress in Haman)* published in 2007, but the report is more of a summarization of only the wooden documents discovered between 2006 and 2007 rather than a systemic overview of those excavated from Seongsan Fortress. This is why Hashimoto provides a summary of the material on the Seongsan Fortress wooden documents up to 2007 in the appendix, although readers would have welcomed the addition of material on those discovered after 2007 as well.

Hashimoto's attention to the minute details will greatly benefit researchers as he adopts the numbers used in *Mokkan jajeon (Wooden Document Character Dictionary)* that was published by the Gaya National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in 2011 to enumerate the wooden documents in his appendix, thus alleviating any further confusion from the numbering. He also deciphers the inscriptions on the wooden documents himself instead of simply using those published in *Mokkan jajeon*, thereby demonstrating the

advancements made in the research on the wooden documents of Seongsan Fortress.

Chapter 2 discusses the wooden documents with inscriptions related to the *Analects*. Currently three of these have been discovered in the Korean peninsula; only two had been found when Hashimoto was publishing his book. This makes it difficult to understand why he would write an entire chapter on only two wooden documents given that his book is, as the title says, a study on ancient Korean wooden documents. Section 2 of Chapter 2 in fact examines these two wooden documents with inscriptions from the *Analects* within the larger context of ancient wooden documents of East Asia. As I will write later, Chapter 3 is titled "Other Wooden Documents" but also includes a discussion of wooden documents discovered in Anapji, Gyeongju, as well as some of the wooden documents for ancestor worship, the over 100 fragments of the wooden documents of Baekje, and the wooden documents discovered from the sunken ship of Goryeo. Considering the various locations of excavation, as the table above shows, the discussion on them feels rather brief.

Hashimoto may have decided to focus on the *Analects* in Chapter 2 due to the fact that over thirty of the wooden documents with inscriptions from the *Analects* have been discovered in Japan. In *Jiba ui Noneo, jisang ui Noneo (The Analects of Confucius Overground and Underground)* published in 2012, Hashimoto authored an article titled "Hanguk eseo chulto doen Noneo mokkan ui hyeongtae wa yongdo" (The Form and Uses of Wooden Documents with Inscriptions from the *Analects of Confucius* Excavated in Korea). This article served as the basis for Chapter 2, which explains why he examines the wooden documents in question from an East Asian perspective rather than places them within the context of Korean ancient wooden documents. I will thus devote more space to examining the other wooden documents Hashimoto covers in Chapter 3 considering the book's intention as a study of ancient Korean wooden documents.

As I have previously mentioned, Chapter 3 does not provide a comprehensive overview of ancient Korean wooden documents despite its title, "Other Wooden Documents." The first section in Chapter 3 looks at the wooden documents discovered in Anapji, Gyeongju, a site significant both as the first place wooden documents were discovered in the Korean peninsula as well as symbolically in having been the former capital of Silla. Hashimoto, however, fails to mention the wooden documents discovered in other sites of

Silla, including a large number found in Wolseong Moat. In the second section of this chapter, titled “Recently Excavated Wooden Documents,” it is difficult to understand why Hashimoto assigns a subsection equally to both the two wooden documents of ancestor worship and the over 100 Baekje wooden documents. A possible explanation might be that he only examined a select few among the latter, but even if this is the case, Hashimoto does not provide the criteria by which his selection was made. It appears that he chose those with distinctive characteristics or the ones that caught the interest of Japanese researchers.

The third part of Section 2 of Chapter 3 is meaningful in that it discusses the newly excavated bamboo documents discovered in the Korean peninsula. However, I wonder whether having a section in this chapter introducing the wooden documents of Goryeo is necessary in understanding ancient Korean wooden documents. Section 2 of Chapter 3 does not make it exactly clear whether or how research on ancient Korean wooden documents can and should be carried out.

Of course, the current lack of a systematic overview of Korean wooden documents is more than enough to remind readers of the value of Hashimoto’s research and his book. I would have preferred though that he introduced more of the ancient wooden documents of Korea or diversified his approach in their examination.

## Review of Methodology

Hashimoto is a member of the Japanese Society for the Study of Wooden Documents and has shown a great interest in Korean wooden documents. This is perhaps why he is very careful in his examination of Korea as displayed in the way he does not simply rehash previous readings of the inscriptions on the wooden documents of Seongsan Fortress but provides his own version in the appendix of Chapter 1.

Nevertheless, a problem surfaces in the basic premise underlying his study. This fallacy is not a solitary issue of Hashimoto’s work but has long been interwoven in the general research trend itself—namely, the study of wooden documents based on the erroneous presumption that culture spread from China through Korea and reached Japan.

Of course, I am not denying that culture flowed in this way. What I am saying is that a one-size-fits-all approach should be avoided, particularly in the case of wooden documents. Wooden documents were used before the Common Era in China and were replaced with paper in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after the use of it became widespread by Cai Lun. In the Korean peninsula, however, the use of wooden documents is clustered around the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century. Although paper existed during this period, wooden documents were easier to procure as writing material and thus more commonly used than paper. Such practices spread to Japan, and excavations have confirmed that wooden documents were used mainly during the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Japan.

This is where the problem lies: it is easy to see how the use of wooden documents spread from China to the Korean peninsula. But were they actually used in the two areas for the same reasons? In the case of the Korean peninsula and Japan, several examples show that wooden documents in both areas were used similarly. China, on the other hand, seems to have had a wholly different system of using wooden documents, not to mention that they are not called wooden documents (*mokkan*) but bamboo strips and wooden slips (*gandok* 簡牘). In other words, it is highly possible that their attitude towards wooden documents were fundamentally different.

During the symposium jointly held by the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents and the Japanese Society for the Study of Wooden Documents in 2019, Ichi Hiroki argued that it would be more useful to compare Japanese wooden documents with those from the Korean peninsula, given the proximity of the respective periods in which they were used, than to compare the latter with the bamboo strips and wooden slips of the Han dynasty, which are the most numerous among Chinese wooden documents. Ichi’s argument has a point if one considers the over 200-year gap between the use of these artifacts in China and the Korean peninsula. Usually the convention was to first seek the origins of wooden documents of the Korean peninsula in China, and then in Japan if the former amounted to nothing. Looking at the temporal distribution of their use, however, it would make more sense to first locate the origins in Japan and consider Chinese examples only afterwards.

Hashimoto writes that the flow of wooden documents in East Asia can be grasped by understanding Korean wooden documents. Such a statement is possible only when the basic premise is that wooden documents spread from China to Japan via the Korean peninsula. We should ask, as Ichi argued,

however, just how much China and Korea shared in terms of these objects. The use of wooden documents in the Lelang Commandary was confirmed by the discovery of wooden documents recording household registry (*hogubu mokkan*) and wooden documents with inscriptions from the *Analects* at Jeongbaek-dong. Why then hasn't any evidence of the usage of wooden documents in the Korean peninsula between 313, when the Lelang Commandary collapsed, and the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century been discovered yet? One may attribute this to the general lag in excavation research; the fact that the wooden documents discovered to date are concentrated around the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, is clearly significant.

Hashimoto also writes of the possibility of restoring the framework of wooden documents in East Asia, although based on the table of contents, this East Asian perspective is only suggested in the chapter on the *Analects* and in the final section. In spite of what the title of the book suggests—that the subject will be ancient Korean wooden documents—perhaps Hashimoto in fact set out to imagine the East Asian world through the lens of wooden documents. This might explain the reference to East Asia in Chapter 2 and in the final section. This in turn may have resulted from an uncritical acceptance of the presumed direction of cultural distribution as I have mentioned above. Readers may want to keep this in mind while reading the book.

## Conclusion

Hashimoto's work no doubt contributes to a better understanding of Korean wooden documents. While research on wooden documents has been conducted in Japan since the 1970s, it was only starting from the 2000s when full-fledged research on them began in Korea. Additionally, the number of excavated wooden documents in Korea is few compared to Japan. Even putting aside potential differences in how wooden documents were perceived in both countries, it is difficult to proceed with research solely on wooden documents when the number of discovered items in Korea is so small. This is why Japanese researchers have shown and continue to show a great interest in the Seongsan Fortress in Haman, where the largest number of wooden documents has been discovered from a single site.

Hashimoto's work also emerges from this context. There are some jumps in his interpretations as he bases his understanding of Korean wooden

documents on research done on Japanese wooden documents, but they do not deviate excessively, and it is safe to say that his book, *Kankoku kodai mokkan no kenkyū*, holds important historiographical value in this field.

There remains the fact, however, that the book does not provide a comprehensive account of wooden documents since Hashimoto chooses to examine only the wooden documents of interest. This may be because of the difference in how wooden documents are managed in Japan and Korea: while Japan has a department under the Nara National Research Institute of Cultural Properties in charge of wooden documents, each entity in charge of excavation in Korea uses its own classification criteria and categorization method, resulting in the reduction of accessibility or integrity of the data.

At the same time, the three other texts I have referred to earlier also do not examine the entirety of wooden documents discovered in the Korean peninsula. It may be therefore too early to critique Hashimoto's book at this moment. Perhaps it is more important to appreciate the fact that the interest Japan has shown in Korean wooden documents has culminated in the publication of a book.

Efforts to systematize Korean wooden documents should continue. As one of the newer researchers in this field of wooden documents, my task would be to ceaselessly propose ideas and contribute to further systematizing Korean wooden documents. I end this review by writing that Hashimoto's book was one of the factors strengthening this resolution.

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