

A Solid Reading of the History of Ancient Korea by the Mainstream Generation

Hanguk godaesa 1 [A History of Ancient Korea, vol. 1], by Changseok Kim, Jongbok Kim, Gihwan Im, Hojeong Song, and Hogyu Yeo. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2016, 308 pp., KRW 15,900, ISBN: 979-1-156-12082-7 (paperback)

Hanguk godaesa 2 [A History of Ancient Korea, vol. 2], by Deokjae Jeon, Gyeongcheol Jo, Jaehong Kim, and Chanheung Bak. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2016, 238 pp., KRW 13,900, ISBN: 979-1-156-12083-4 (paperback)

A Much-needed and Timely Accomplishment

Few, if any, areas attract as much interest from the general public as the ancient history of Korea. Take a glance at the history corner in large bookstores in South Korea, and one will easily observe a number of people hanging around the ancient Korean history section. Which leads us to the problem: a considerable number of books on the ancient history of Korea are based on “pseudohistory.” Amid such “false” accounts—think of a western history book claiming that “France was actually located towards the east of the Ural Mountains”—finding an ancient Korean history book that can give the reader a “true” glimpse of what it purports to do can be a frustrating experience.

Even if one manages to find a decent book on ancient Korean history, however, another obstacle looms ahead—most of them turn out to be academic texts narrowly focused on a specific topic. In other words, there aren’t many books at the present that provide the general public with a “not-too-difficult” survey of the current landscape of research on ancient Korean history. *Hanguksa (History of Korea)* by the National Institute of Korean History was not only published more than twenty years ago, but also consists of a towering number of volumes. The publication of the two volumes of *Uri sidae ui Hanguk godaesa (History of Ancient Korea in our Times)* in 2017 drew attention; but while it was certainly a good text, it was based on the scripts for an open lecture held to mark the 30th anniversary of the Society for Korean Ancient History and thus mostly focused on certain themes rather than providing a comprehensive overview. For this reason, the release of the two volumes of *Hanguk godaesa* as part of the

history series from the Korean History Society carries a great deal of significance. That is, it is a “not-too-thick” and much-appreciated book that came along at a time when “up-to-date books” offering a comprehensive yet accessible overview of the history of ancient Korea were virtually absent. Although my own academic accomplishments leave much to be desired, I have decided to task myself with reviewing this much-needed and timely publication.

A Reflection of the Mainstream Generation’s View of Ancient History

Both volumes of *Hanguk godaesa*, like the other books in the Korean History Society’s history series, are coauthored by a total of nine authors—five (Kim Jongbok, Kim Changseok, Im Gihwan, Song Hojeong, and Yeo Hogyu) and four (Bak Chanheung, Kim Jaehong, Jeon Deokjae, and Jo Gyeongcheol) authors contributed to volume one and two, respectively. The majority of these authors are full-time university faculty leading the field of ancient Korean history; the others are also second to none in each of their own respective fields.

Interestingly, all nine authors began their undergraduate studies in the early to mid-1980s. Meanwhile, the history series of the Korean History Society came out when the organization, founded in 1988, was nearing its 30th anniversary. It is then perhaps only natural that the generation most suited to author a Korean history series would be made up of those figures who had set foot in their undergraduate studies in (Korean) history back then and who have now established a solid foundation of research in academia—the so-called “586 generation,” a term referring to those currently in their fifties who entered university in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s. To put it another way, turning thirty years old means fully entering adulthood, which, in the timeline of academic achievement, corresponds to the fifty-something figures currently leading the research in Korean history. As someone in his forties and a member of the cohort who began their undergraduate studies between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, my own academic achievements pale in comparison.

Let us now take a look at the contents of the book. *Hanguk godaesa* consists of two volumes, among which only the contents of volume one are narrated chronologically, from Old Joseon to the North-South States period; volume two, on the other hand, is composed thematically, with each chapter

examining a specific topic of interest from the history of ancient Korea. The nine authors each wrote a chapter, which are headed with both a title and a subtitle. Having subtitles often reflects the overall contents more accurately than when there are none, and thus is a good effort to help make the book more accessible to the general public.

Volume one begins with a chapter on Old Joseon and the early states. Titled “The Forming of Ancient Societies: The Formation of Early Ancient States and their Structures,” it is written by Song Hojeong, a professor at Korea National University of Education, who is the first scholar in South Korea to receive a doctorate in the history of Old Joseon as well as the pioneering author of the first academic book on the history of Buyeo. The period itself necessitates conferring with archeological findings, but what comes through is Song’s active attempt to portray this period through the lens of historical remains and artifacts, no doubt the outcome of a steady accumulation of work in the field of historical archeology.

Following this is the chapter “The Development of Ancient Societies and their Reorganization: The Division of China, and the Establishment and Development of Ancient Societies,” which delves into the Three Kingdoms period. The author is Yeo Hogyu, professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and a leading figure in the history of Goguryeo, who has investigated the state system of Goguryeo based on No Taedon’s theory of state structure in ancient Korea. Yeo, who is also no stranger to archeological findings, draws freely on relevant research as well, but what stands out in his account is the way he examines the development of ancient Korea in relation to what is happening in China, as the subtitle implies. This is essential particularly when the voices calling to move beyond looking at the history of Korea in isolation and instead view the past from an East Asian standpoint have long been gaining strength.

The subject of the next chapter is the unification process of the Three Kingdoms. Entitled “The Unification of the Three Kingdoms by Silla: Changes in Domestic and Foreign State of Affairs, and Silla’s Unification of the Three Kingdoms,” the chapter is composed by Im Gihwan, a professor at Seoul National University of Education who, along with Yeo Hogyu, currently leads the research in the history of Goguryeo in South Korea. Anyone who has more than a passing interest in history will particularly welcome this chapter, in which Im offers a historiological account in measured prose. Of note is how he recounts the movement of foreign powers not simply through its “manifestations”

but by also taking into account “structure” and “context,” aspects which may be difficult to discern by the nonspecialist eye.

It probably goes without saying that the North-South States period is covered next. Textbooks usually narrate the two states of this period—Unified Silla (South) and Balhae (North)—separately, likely due to the lesser degree of significant interaction between the two compared to that of the Three Kingdoms. The format of this text is no different.

Up first is Unified Silla, or the middle and late period of Silla. In “The Opening and Unfolding of Unified Silla: Restructuring of the Ruling System, and its Demise,” Kim Changseok, a professor at Kangwon National University and the first researcher to really look into the issue of trade during ancient Korea, sheds light onto this side of Unified Silla as well. What we should pay attention to, though, is the way Kim focuses his narrative on the ruling system and social structure, which may well be a natural result of examining an extended period of peace. Given the fact that the general public tends to rapidly lose interest after the Three Kingdoms are unified, it is worth taking notice of Kim’s intriguing depiction of the Unified Silla period spanning between the Three Kingdoms and Goryeo periods by utilizing a variety of case studies.

The chapter on Balhae, “The Unfolding of the History of Balhae: The Founding, Development, and Decline of Balhae,” comes after. The author is Kim Jongbok, assistant professor at Andong National University and a trendsetter together with Song Giho, Han Gyucheol, and Im Sangseon for current research in the history of Balhae. While other more weighty states in the history of ancient Korea are discussed across several chapters, the entire rise and fall of Balhae are packed in this one chapter. One can imagine the constraints within which the author had to work; nevertheless, Kim provides a well-written overview. The beginning of the chapter that opens with the movement of the migrants makes it clear that Balhae is a state succeeding Goguryeo.

Volume two, on the other hand, starts off with a chapter on the social history of ancient Korea. “Agricultural Productivity and Village Societies: the Autonomy of Agricultural Village Societies and State Governance” is written by Kim Jaehong, a professor and accomplished scholar at Kookmin University as well as a fitting choice as author of this chapter considering his superior understanding of archeological findings, which is evident by his past experience of working at a museum. At the same time, this is likely an area the general public find most difficult to approach, as the structure of communities such as

settlement clusters (*eumnak*) or local villages (*chollak*) is not easy to comprehend. In this aspect, Kim appropriately places his focus on the relationship between village communities and the state: while following the course of this relationship, one discovers oneself reaching the end of the ancient period.

The next chapter, “State Finance and Taxation: Financial Revenues and Expenditures of the Three Kingdoms and the North-South States,” then shifts to economic history. The author, Bak Chanheung, currently an investigator of Dokdo material at the National Assembly Library of Korea, is a notable figure in his field who has also cultivated a sharp insight on the colonial interpretation of Korean history. In other words, Bak is an excellent choice among his generation of scholars to write this chapter. As with Kim Jaehong, the problem for Bak lies in the fact that fiscal administration and taxation are topics the general public perceives as extremely difficult. Bak tries his best to alleviate this problem by introducing related case studies as easily as possible, and I believe readers will find the contents fairly accessible.

Following this is the chapter that examines the history of political systems in ancient Korea under the title “The Operating Principle of Politics and the Hereditary Social Status System: The Keywords of Ancient Societies, *Bu* and Bone-rank.” Written by Jeon Deokjae, a professor at Dankook University and a prominent researcher of the history of Silla who scrutinized Silla’s state system and hereditary social status system based on No Taedon’s aforementioned theoretical framework, I find this topic to be perhaps the most approachable. No specialist in this field will be completely ignorant of political systems or the hereditary social status system; moreover, a considerable amount of the content is directly or indirectly mentioned in volume one. Still, the task Jeon faces is again the general public as his readers, and in this regard Jeon inserts examples of epigraphs and other relevant material in the right places to guide the readers through a topic that would have otherwise come across as extremely dry.

Finally, the chapter “The Spiritual World and Ruling Ideology: From the Heavens to the Human, from Myth to History” touches upon intellectual history. The author is Jo Gyeongcheol, head of the Nara Ireum History Institute and an invaluable researcher of the history of Buddhism. The subject of this chapter may well be what the general public finds easiest to approach, since anyone with a certain level of historical knowledge will at least know something about the myths or religions of ancient Korea. This very aspect of being relatively familiar to the public, however, may have come as a challenge for Jo,

which he counters by advancing the theme of harmony and conflict between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

So far, I have briefly commented on the main points of each chapter and introduced their respective authors. In the next section, I will move on to look at the two volumes of this book in its entirety.

A Reader-friendly Introduction of Internally Motivated Change

Despite being coauthored by multiple authors and covering various topics, *Hanguk godaesa* also has a couple of characteristics that consistently run throughout the book as a whole. I cannot say whether this was predetermined during the book's conception or merely a coincidence, but should the latter be true, this would indicate a common critical awareness among these researchers who began their undergraduate studies in the early to mid-1980s. The following is a discussion of the two main characteristics of the book.

First, in surveying the changes that occurred in the states and societies of ancient Korea, the narrative focuses on the domestic situation as the causal factor. In other words, there is a great deal of interest in internal factors. This feature is particularly prominent in volume one, which chronologically relates the overall history of ancient Korea. To be sure, this may have been a mandatory requirement in examining history from a nationalist standpoint in the years following the liberation of Korea and could perhaps be dismissed as being nothing new. But what distinguishes the narrative of this book from that of previous overviews of ancient Korea or contemporary textbooks is its concentration on the “gradual” or “continuous” aspect of such changes. Although alike in their emphasis on the autonomous capability possessed by members of the community in question, the narrative offered here stands somewhat in contrast to the way researchers that came before them—those of the preceding generation who started their undergraduate studies before the early 1980s—viewed drastic changes to have been initiated during a certain period.

For example, rather than seeing the founding of Wiman Joseon as being instrumental in bringing about substantial development in Old Joseon, the book presumes a preexisting confederation of small states in which a dominant local group served as the leading, centripetal force. To put it differently, Wiman

Joseon, the potential of which Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty had to contend with, could commence only because the Wiman group migrated upon an already fairly established foundation. This way of looking at the structure of state communities instead of focusing on an individual figure such as King Jun is an extremely apt attempt. By the same token, this perspective is evident also in the text's descriptions of Goguryeo developing on the backdrop formed by the historical experiences of preceding ancient states or of how the continuation of the finely wrought bronze dagger culture shows that the local forces of Old Joseon maintained their power base well into the Lelang (one of the Four Han commandery units) commandery period.

This feature is apparent throughout the contents that follow. For instance, explaining Goguryeo as solidifying into a centralized state based on its internal growth, or the detailed explication of the period preceding King Geunchogo and Naemul Maripgan in Baekje and Silla, respectively, can all be understood along these lines. This point of view clearly diverges from the previous generation's understanding of how the ancient states were established, namely, upon unprecedented transformations that occurred during the reigns of King Sosurim of Goguryeo, King Geunchogo of Baekje, and Naemul Maripgan of Silla. In addition, it is worth noting that ancient Korea in the fifth century is depicted by detailing the internal situation of the Three Kingdoms and of Gaya (another state that formed along the Three Kingdoms), also a sharp departure from previous tendencies of zooming in on the external expansion of Goguryeo. In outlining the Goguryeo-Sui and Goguryeo-Tang battles as well as the unification process of the Three Kingdoms, topics that inevitably entail invoking foreign components, the text lays out how the objectives of each state's powers worked to intensify such contradictions in foreign relations. This facet has not been given the attention it deserves by other books surveying this period, even when it would obviously take two to tango.

Needless to say, the same characteristic stance runs through the discussion of the long-term peaceful and stabilized North-South States period since it was not as significantly influenced by external situational factors such as war as was the Three Kingdoms period. A good example in the part on Unified Silla is the reference to the accomplishments and limitations of the bureaucratic system during the middle period of Silla, or how the expansion of the local gentry's economic bases as well as their recruiting of private military forces and followers are attributed to the structural aspects of that time. In the case of Balhae, the

lack of historical sources that would have provided a glimpse into the domestic situation makes it difficult to foreground internal factors, but the way the text documents the progression of King Mun's reign through a pro- and anti-Tang configuration can also be interpreted along the same lines.

Second, the book presents a variety of case studies or examples in explicating the reality of ancient Korea including written documents, epigraphs, and even archeological findings. This feature is particularly prominent in volume two which covers specific areas such as social or economic history. In truth, when books intending to give general outlines of a subject try to pack long stretches of history into limited space, important evidential material tends to get omitted or is given only a cursory glance, especially when it is not directly tied to the main topic itself. This text, however, gives the impression of actively utilizing an array of case studies to assist the main narrative. I find this a commendable endeavor on the part of the Korean History Society, all the more so given the society's ceaseless efforts to communicate with the general public.

Specific examples include the rich archeological findings the text draws upon when charting the changes of early agricultural societies during the Three Kingdoms period. Of course the subject matter itself requires utilizing material evidence to shed light on the reality at that time, but the text clearly makes an effort to accompany the artifacts and remains with detailed and reader-friendly explanations instead of dryly enumerating them. Another example is the way various historical records, such as stone monuments, wooden tablets with writings, and documents, are presented like snapshots in covering the latter half of ancient Korea, with the text organically interweaving them into the narrative. Considering how historical sources and artifacts, despite their significance, can only be tools to examine the past, the book seems to have found just the right balance.

This is true for other sections of the text. The explanation of state finances and taxation virtually mentions every relevant historical material that I know of. In the section discussing the political system or the hereditary social status system, epigraphs including those of the stone monument of Silla at Pohang Jungseong-ri (Pohang Jungseong-ri Sillabi), the Yeongil Naengsu-ri Silla stele (Yeongil Naengsu-ri Sillabi), the Silla stele of Uljin Bongpyeong-ri (Uljin Bongpyeong-ri Sillabi), not to mention roof tiles with inscriptions, all make their appearance, and at times the text even try to consult the early records of the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi*). Even those areas outlining the

currents of thought such as myth or religion where presenting actual evidence is difficult nevertheless do their best to introduce cases that can be proved by historical sources and artifacts in the same fashion as the other themes.

The Korean History Society is commonly thought to have concentrated on understanding the internally motivated transformation of the history of Korea and continuously sharing their findings freely with the general public. In that sense, the abovementioned two features marking *Hanguk godaesa* share the trajectory of society until now.

Strengths and Shortcomings

As previously mentioned, *Hanguk godaesa* consists of a total of nine chapters. In the section below, I will offer a few thoughts on what specifically stood out for me in each chapter.

In the chapter discussing the early ancient states, Song mentions that the center of Old Joseon moved, which is striking given that Song has held the position that its center was around the Daedong River basin from beginning to end. To put it more bluntly, Song, despite historically representing a theory more in the minority, follows the consensus of his academic field—that Old Joseon's center moved—in coauthoring an introductory book, which is a remarkable decision one hopes to emulate. It is not uncommon to see researchers insisting on cramming in their own theories or arguments in books aiming to give a general survey of the field even when their views diverge from or are less significant than mainstream academic views. Readers will also appreciate Song's explanation of how states such as Jin and the Three Han States were formed in the middle to southern parts of the Korean peninsula, as the more common tendency was usually to focus on the changes of Old Joseon at the expense of excluding the state of Jin.

At the same time, Song's interpretation of the structuring of *bangwibu* or *sangga* somewhat diverges from the mainstream discourse in this field. He could have also perhaps discussed the limitations or negative influence Lelang commandery had in the course of Korean history. This area deserves more attention considering how the sinicization that took place in Lelang commandery was limited both in terms of region and social status, or how the state system of early Goguryeo, as the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*)

tells us, had not significantly evolved from that of Wiman Joseon, which had perished far earlier.

In the next chapter looking at the Three Kingdoms period, Yeo offers a fresh lens through which to view the overseas movements during the reign of King Geunchogo of Baekje—by connecting it with the East Asian maritime trade sphere. Frankly speaking, I sometimes find myself unintentionally disregarding the entire facet of maritime trade itself since Baekje was in a situation unlikely to have launched militaristic expansions overseas. Yeo also astutely devotes a considerable amount of space to put the spotlight on Gaya, as well as Baekje and Silla, as part of the alliance formed against Goguryeo's southward expansion. Yeo's argument that Goguryeo transferred its capital to Pyeongyang to prepare against the invasion of Northern Wei, however, would benefit from a more meticulous examination. Although I do not deny its possibility, the period in question is before Northern Wei conquered the Xia dynasty, and many different theories have been proposed regarding the goal of the capital's relocation.

Moving on, Im makes interesting observations in his chapter on the unification process of the Three Kingdoms with respect to the Three Kingdoms' perception of Tang. He goes on to view the possibility of Goguryeo and Baekje forming a solid alliance as unlikely. Although I agree with his argument, it would have been further strengthened by a more detailed elucidation of how he came to hold this view, since examples of Goguryeo and Baekje joining hands in launching campaigns are by no means nonexistent.

As for the chapter on Unified Silla, Kim Changseok gives a compelling description of the conflicts in foreign relations between Japan by bringing in international power dynamics and the importance of trade. His account, strengthened from his expertise in the field of trade, defies the common assumption that foreign relations in ancient Korea were more or less determined by tributary relations or by war and conflict. In touching upon monarchical authority during the middle period of Silla and the bureaucratic system, however, Kim unfortunately does not directly address the so-called absolute monarchy theory. Readers would have benefited from his input, as more skeptical views of whether or not the actual authority of the king can be termed "absolute" has long been part of the conversation, calling into question past views that saw the middle period of Unified Silla as when a governing order based on absolute kingship was established.

Most of the issues pertaining to Balhae are well covered on the whole in the following chapter, though Kim Jongbok could have dived more deeply into the details of Dae Joyeong's tribal and birth origins, a topic that continues to come up when examining the issue of Balhae's historical position.

In the opening chapter to volume two, Kim Jaehong offers a very friendly and detailed explanation on farming equipment in his chapter on the social history of ancient Korea. Readers like myself who have no ties with farming villages will no doubt be grateful for Kim's efforts to paint a more accessible picture of past societies. On the other hand, Kim seems to brush over the state of affairs during the late period of Silla and the Later Three Kingdoms (Unified Silla, Later Baekje, and Taebong) era. Although this may be due to constraints in terms of writing space, Kim's analysis of other periods makes the reader expect him to equally attend to these two phases as well using specific supporting evidence.

In the next chapter on the economic history of ancient Korea, Bak introduces a diverse selection of arguments in explaining certain concepts and nouns. Readers unfamiliar with Bak's previous writings therefore may not be able to completely grasp what his argument is, though this is likely a deliberate choice he made considering that he was writing a more general overview. It would have been interesting, however, to see Bak explore those issues relating to the Later Three Kingdoms period as this chapter is tightly interconnected with the one before it.

As I have mentioned earlier, Jeon presents a wonderful array of supporting historical material to make his chapter on the political history of ancient Korea understandable to the general public. By contrast, he does not devote enough space to discuss other theories besides the *bu* system when explaining the early political system. As specialists in this field probably know, there exist other views surrounding the political system including the argument that it took the form of "early centralization" based on the early records of the *History of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk sagi)* or an "aristocratic council" system. Although I find the *bu* system to be closer to how it would have been in the past, these different theories nevertheless deserve more attention given their significance in understanding the historiography of ancient Korean states. That being said, this may have well been a conscious decision on Jeon's part in order to make the content more accessible to the general public.

Finally, Jo clearly makes an effort to balance the level of difficulty in

narrating the intellectual history of ancient Korea, an undertaking undoubtedly possible due to Jo's long-accumulated work in this field. At the same time, I have slight misgivings on how Jo's arguments feature all too clearly overall as this runs the risk of presenting views that remain in the minority. For instance, the argument that King Jinsa ascended to the throne through the backing of those who were against accepting Buddhism or that conflicts between Buddhism and Confucianism existed in Baekje and Silla are arguments that may warrant further reexamination. In addition, provided that rites and rituals stem from people's thoughts during a certain period, a more satisfying account would have covered state rituals in greater detail.

The Task We Face is...

In concluding my review of *Hanguk godaesa* of the Korean History Society's history series, my strongest impression of this book is an engaging, well-written text that articulates the critical awareness and research trends of the current leading figures in the field—that is, the fifty-something researchers who began their undergraduate studies in the early to mid-1980s. In short, a valuable contribution to our present times.

As for me, I am part of the generation who embarked upon their academic journey sometime between the mid- to late 1990s and the early 2000s and are in their late thirties to mid-forties. We are not yet leading figures in our academic circles; still, time will inevitably make us assume that role. Already several researchers are teaching as university professors or are making a name for themselves by being productive and prolific in their research.

What kind of a comprehensive overview will the books authored by our generation be like? It may be too early to give an answer given that most of the researchers in our generation have not yet established themselves in a more solid position in the field. Still, if our past trajectory of growing up relatively free from the constraints of nationalism is indeed of any influence, I can say that the boundaries of our vision will likely be broader. Furthermore, from my experience encountering researchers who do not regard “centralization” or “growth and progress” as the ultimate themes to aspire to, I expect that the breadth of our understandings towards marginalized communities and excluded values will expand.

Currently, several researchers of my generation have formed the Society of Young Historians (Jeolmeun yeoksa hakja moim) and are publishing academic texts geared towards the general public, including *Hanguk godeasa wa saibi yeoksahak* (*The History of Ancient Korea, and Pseudo History*) and *Yogmang neomeo ui Hanguk godaesa* (*The History of Ancient Korea beyond Desire*). As a member of this society myself, I am still searching for the answer as to what my focus would be if I were ever offered the chance to author a general survey. I am certain that our generation shares this question. This is where the significance of this exemplary book lies—by being one that will be reinterpreted and reexamined by following generations.

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