

Book Reviews

Volume 21 Number 2

December 2018

The Review of Korean Studies

www.kci.go.kr

The Ancient State of Puyŏ in Northeast Asia: Archaeology and Historical Memory, by Mark E. Byington. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016, 398 pp., US \$59.95, ISBN: 978-0-6747-3719-8 (hardcover)

Until 2016 Puyŏ¹ was a vague, ill-defined polity situated somewhere in continental Northeast Asia that existed sometime perhaps between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE. All of that has changed with the publication of Mark E. Byington's study, *The Ancient State of Puyŏ in Northeast Asia: Archaeology and Historical Memory*. From the first pages of this study, Byington sets out to use all available archaeological and historical data "to reconstruct the sequence of processes that led to the formation and development of the Puyŏ state." (p. 2). In addition he seeks to discuss the decline and collapse of that state, and assess the legacy of Puyŏ. Byington goes on to point out that although the focus of this book is on early Northeast Asian history, "its implications bear directly upon the later historiography of the Korean peninsula and upon the formation of group, state, and national identity current in present-day Korea" (ibid.).

The time for such a study is "ripe." In the last several decades, archaeologists have begun to examine the physical geography where Puyŏ was thought to have existed. At the same time, especially in South Korea, scholarship on the early history of the peninsula and Northeast Asia has expanded exponentially, bringing greater clarity to what we know and don't know and enabling a more critical analysis. This particular examination is further enhanced by the fact that Byington himself physically lived in the area under study for several years while completing research for his dissertation.

Although the title of Byington's book is "The Ancient State of Puyŏ in Northeast Asia," its focus goes beyond just Puyŏ. Byington places Puyŏ within the context of Northeast Asia geographically, archaeologically, historically, and culturally. So much is this the case that even a casual reader will learn about the

1. For Korean or non-English words, the new (revised) Romanization (RR) convention is consistently used in the *Review of Korean Studies* unless there are special circumstances where alternative systems such as McCune-Reischauer (MR) are deemed necessary. The book reviewed in this manuscript, however, is written according to the McCune-Reischauer system. Consequently, this book review is allowed to follow the MR convention.

history of Northeast Asia before the formation of Puyŏ, and the subsequent history of the region well after Puyŏ physically disappears, leaving only its legacy.

Chapter 1 frames the questions Byington seeks to answer as he distinguishes between “Puyŏ as a state in its own right and Puyŏ as an historical device from which later states drew their political legitimacy” (p. 22). The heart of his argument unfolds in Chapter 2 in which he presents the early history of Northeast Asia, China, and Korea based on what is already known from the dynastic histories of early China. As noted above, archaeology is another tool in understanding the region and especially the rise of the Yan state (fourth century BCE to second century BCE) and the Han dynasty. Although this discussion focuses on events in Liaoxi and Liaodong, much of it is directly pertinent to the early polities north of Korea. Chapters 3 and 4 are largely given over to archaeology. In these chapters Byington exhaustively studies the record emerging from artifacts. Although, for historians, these chapters might easily be overlooked, they play a necessary role in reconstructing the early history and testing the assumptions drawn from the written record. Byington is able to determine that Puyŏ arose out of contacts and pressures from not only the Yan and Han, but others as well, such as the nomadic Xianbei.

Building on the earlier chapters, Chapter 5, the heart of Byington’s argument, reconstructs the history of the Puyŏ state. By the start of the first century BCE, Puyŏ confronted the Han dynasty and its expansion into the area. By in large, Puyŏ’s ties with the Han were beneficial as an alliance was struck between the two powers (with the possible exception of Wang Mang’s short-lived rise to power, 9-23 CE). Ultimately in the fourth century CE, as the central Chinese plain divided into competing rivalries, Puyŏ fell under the military might of the Murong Xianbei. At this same time, events in Puyŏ are impacted by the Koguryŏ kingdom which quickly emerged as a power in the northeast. This chapter explores Puyŏ’s ties with Koguryŏ, using the *Samguk sagi*, Korea’s twelfth century text, to reconstruct that relationship. Most readers are struck by the similarity between Puyŏ’s and Koguryŏ’s foundation myths. As Byington examines this relationship, and given the hostilities that mark much of this contact, he is skeptical of the notion that the Koguryŏ ruling house was a direct by-product of Puyŏ. Byington states, “It is unlikely that Koguryŏ’s rulers were descended from the Puyŏ ruling house” (p. 177). He hopes archaeology might eventually clarify this relationship.

Having examined the historical record in Chapter 5, Byington discusses

society and culture in Chapter 6. To grasp a clearer understanding of Puyŏ's culture, he reexamines the Puyŏ foundation myth. This myth can be tied, in some ways, to archeological remains and it also emphasizes "the alien origin of the ruling elite of Puyŏ" (p. 185). To gain another angle into understanding Puyŏ, Byington studies the Wei Chronicles for information on such matters as geography, natural resources, organizations, ritual, and law. But Byington is very cautious in his discussions. He alerts the reader to the possible subjective nature of the dynastic histories in that compilers carried their own biases and had opinions as to how non-Chinese lived. He is equally careful when dealing with archaeological finds such as walled sites, writing that his conclusions "must be considered provisional since the ascription of walled remains to Puyŏ for the most part is based on inference rather than hard material evidence" (p. 196). He has put together an excellent study of Puyŏ and provided concrete answers, but acknowledges the need to challenge the sources. Nevertheless, by using archaeology and history together, Byington has provided "results that permit a clearer image of Puyŏ society than would have been possible without this multidisciplinary comparative approach" (p. 229).

Although Puyŏ was invaded and its population dispersed in 346 CE, the legacy of Puyŏ remained vital as Chapter 7 describes. Here Byington focuses on the dispersal of the Puyŏ population, the struggle for control over the former Puyŏ territory, and the persistent use of the Puyŏ name as a means to gain political or cultural legitimacy in Northeast Asia (p. 231). Both Koguryŏ and the Mohe (Malgal) vied for control over the former Puyŏ territory and then Koguryŏ retained control until its own collapse in 668. Parhae came to occupy that territory, and Puyŏ played an important place in Parhae's state identity. It is in both Koguryŏ and Paekche that the Puyŏ legacy remained the strongest through their foundation myths. However, Byington marshals evidence to challenge the alleged Puyŏ origins of Paekche, too.

In his concluding chapter Byington looks at theories of state formation and concludes that Puyŏ formed as a result of outside influences, trade, and limitations posed by neighboring states or what he labels as territorial circumspection contributing to the need to centralize authority to maintain a strong defense. This discussion leads him once again to the foundation myths which he shows served numerous functions, depending on the time and the actors. It is through foundation myths that, for example, both Koguryŏ and Paekche gained "authority and legitimacy." To Byington the myths carried

many functions. Even if the Koguryŏ and Pakeche ruling families might not have shared a common descent with Puyŏ, there well may have been “some significant cultural connection.” Byington appends to his conclusion several appendixes in which he explores various interpretations of Puyŏ’s geographic location and its capital. Relying on both archaeology and the written records, he offers a well balanced analysis and sound conclusions.

There is little to find fault with this study. Byington has amassed a very detailed analysis and is always careful in arriving at his conclusions. He looks at issues from many different angles, suggesting possible solutions before providing his own interpretation. Repeatedly, after providing a very comprehensive picture, he offers a short summary enabling the reader to move on to the next topic with a solid foundation. To make his conclusions still clearer, Byington has provided excellent maps and sketches that convey both historical and geographic knowledge. He has also provided photographs of artifacts and sites to help the reader situate both the historical and archaeological information, although some may be criticized for a lack of clarity. With extensive and informative notes, he leads the reader to explore new areas if so inclined. The bibliography introduces material in four languages that are needed to explore all the intricacies of Puyŏ’s history. Although the task to understand Puyŏ may seem daunting at the start, Byington has made every effort to present Puyŏ with care and compassion.

Ever humble, Byington suggests his effort is just a start as he hopes future histories along with archaeological finds will further clarify Puyŏ’s place in Northeast Asia. We can certainly look forward to new research on this topic, but Byington has set the standard. Students and scholars of Northeast Asia, early Korea, and early China in the future will have to start their own explorations with Mark E. Byington’s “The Ancient State of Puyŏ.”

Edward J. SHULTZ (shultz@hawaii.edu)
University of Hawaii at Manoa