

Koryŏ History: What Needs to be Done?

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While the field of Koryŏ studies is almost non-existent in the West, in Korea there are hundreds, if not thousands, of articles, books, and theses available. Thus, when writing a history of Koryŏ in English, it would be foolish to ignore this vast body of knowledge. But of course it has to be approached critically, and therefore it is necessary to understand the characteristics of Korean historical studies on Koryŏ: how has the field developed, what are its merits, what are the problems? What still needs to be done? What are the main trends and approaches? Despite the apparent vibrancy of the field, over the past decades very few studies have appeared that fundamentally challenge any of the dominant perceptions of Koryŏ history. Apart from some discussions on the nature of the ruling class—i.e. whether or not it can be termed aristocratic—on the whole new studies try to ascertain new facts from sources rather than promote any new framework for interpretation. In general, the majority of publications concern institutional history (government and bureaucracy), and there are important additional fields such as economy, religion, and art. But there has as yet been little attempt at interdisciplinary work or at reevaluating the fundamental assumptions of each subfield. In this paper I will therefore try to identify some of the main problems in doing Koryŏ history; this is mainly a diagnostic exercise: it is not meant to propose ways to improve the historiography of Koryŏ.

1. Koryŏ's 'identity crisis'

Usually referred to as “Koryŏ's middle ages,” rather than any resemblance with the European middle ages, however, it seems to be more a case of “caught in the middle.” With Silla clearly identifiable as “native” (think of Silla gold crowns, *hwarang*, *hyangga*,...) and Chosŏn as “Confucian,” what comes to mind if we think of Koryŏ? Buddhism is of course most often mentioned, yet how exactly Buddhism shaped people's lives is still poorly understood. Recently scholars have been emphasizing the fact that Koryŏ was a pluralist (*tawŏnjŏk*) society. Although this view has a lot of merit, it is hardly something that appeals strongly to the imagination. Celadon is also often mentioned when it comes to defining Koryŏ, yet again it is hardly unique, and not very indicative of society. A key problem is that we have a very poor visual record of how Koryŏ people lived or worked, or what they wore. It seems that the best chances may come from the study of grassroots society: never a centralized state, groups such as the *hyangni* and organizations such as the *pon'gwan* system may hold the key to a correct, more lively vision of Koryŏ society. Perhaps the combined use of archeology with

the study of alternative sources such as epitaphs or inscribed tablets (*mokkan*) may hold the key. But above all, I think it is important to acknowledge that we have a problem.

2. The lack of true primary sources

The lack of primary sources is of course well known and oft lamented. Yet the limitations of what we have, and the kind of sources that we are missing out on, have not been adequately studied. For example, regarding our main sources, the *Koryŏsa* and *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ*, the critical research by Pyŏn T'aesŏp remains virtually the only critical appraisal of these works. Of course, numerous studies have been undertaken since, and detailed translations of parts of the *Koryŏsa* published by the Academy of Korean Studies press are also helpful. Nevertheless, there has been no systematic attempt at analyzing the text truly critically. Most research still treats it as a primary source instead of an official, heavily biased and redacted, account of events. The *Koryŏsa* is clearly uneven in its treatment of events and people, and this cannot be simply attributed to the fact that many primary sources (i.e., *sillok*) were lost when it was finally compiled in the mid-fifteenth century. More work has to be done on its organizing principles, stylistic peculiarities, differences between different parts etc.

3. Adequate survey of the secondary literature

I have long given up on trying to keep track of the numerous publications on Koryŏ that appear every year. Although they of course help to further our knowledge of Koryŏ, it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. There is definitely a need for a capable scholar to undertake a survey of the field so as to draw some general conclusions regarding the state of the field, the trends, and the provisional conclusions that can be drawn from it. General surveys are either simply digests of existing research, or general narratives for a wider audience. Also, with the steadily accruing number of archeological reports of excavations of Koryŏ graves, temple sites, and other places, it is high time to start comparing the results of such works with the results of traditional scholarship, which still over-privileges the *Koryŏsa*.

4. Periodization

Surprisingly, I could not locate any study of the periodization of Koryŏ history. This means that the assumed framework (early Koryŏ, florescence after Munjong, Military period, Mongol interference and domination, and late Koryŏ) has not been challenged. Is this really the best way to organize the history of Koryŏ, or are there any other important breaks that may be more important in understanding its history?

5. Re-interpretation of Key Events

History ultimately still hinges on a correct understanding of key events, regardless of whether one favors narrative history, *longue-duree* history, or post-structural history. Perhaps because of the dominant framework established by Lee Ki-baik's history of Korea, however, there seems to be a dearth of detailed studies of key events; most histories take a kind of bird's eye perspective, with little attention to the actors. Yet as Remco Breuker's revisionist history of the Ten Injunctions has shown, a correct understanding of events and people—in this case, King Hyōnjong, the issue of his legitimacy, and his flight south—are key to understanding the characteristics of a key document such as the Ten Injunctions. Yet reactions to this new interpretation show that a literal interpretation of the “master source”, i.e. the *Koryōsa*, still predominates (박종기, 134). The only way to get out of this impasse is, in my view, to go back to the sources and provide more close readings of key events; a good example of how this can be done is Hugh Kang's masterful study of the succession struggle following T'aejo's demise. This goes against the grain of most recent Western historical scholarship, which focuses on discourses and patterns, yet I firmly believe that only if we have a firm basis of “traditional” source analysis, attention to the sources' biases and limitations, as well as an understanding of the actors and their motivations, will it be possible to move to the “next stage” of Koryō history.

References

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