

The Goryeo Dynasty Meets the Modern Public

Goryeo sidaesa 1 [A History of Goryeo, vol. 1], by In-ho Kim, Jae-woo Park, Kyung-jin Yoon, and Myeong-yeop Chu. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2017, 316 pp., KRW 17,500, ISBN: 979-1-156-12102-2 (paperback)

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A Welcome Introduction to Goryeo History

2018 marks the 1100th anniversary of Taejo 太祖 Wang Geon 王建 founding the kingdom of Goryeo in 918 AD. Historians and academics have been organizing a multitude of collaborative projects and academic conferences in honor of the occasion. What's more, various institutions have been arranging exhibitions, lectures and publications in order to involve public audiences in the commemorations as well. As such, interest in the Goryeo Dynasty has been peaking in and out of academic circles, in line with the celebration of Goryeo's so-called birthday.

The number of studies regarding the Goryeo Dynasty has been significantly increasing over recent years. According to "Retrospect and Prospect" from *Yeoksa hakbo* (*The Korean Historical Review* 歷史學報), a journal that follows trends in research on Korean history, nearly every research organization has been reporting growth in study numbers over the last ten years. This increase in research quantity has subsequently led to the expansion of research fields. Fields that have previously been dominated by political history, socioeconomic history, and history of thought have recently diversified to include more rarified areas such as psychological history, history of international relations, and cultural history. History of Goryeo is no exception.

In addition to being the 1100th anniversary of the founding of Goryeo, 2018 also marks thirty years since the establishment of the Korean History Society. This organization was founded in 1988 with the purpose of contributing to the democratization and independence of Korean society by advocating the establishment of "scientific and practical studies of history." As

the organization's scope has expanded over the past thirty years, it has grown to become arguably one of the most representative establishments for Korean historical studies. During that time, the Korean History Society has undertaken numerous academic projects while simultaneously upholding its mission statement by becoming a leader in the popularization of history and historical study and a liaison between the enclave of historical academia and society at large.

Among the collections planned and published by the Korean History Society is *A History of Goryeo*, issued in time to capitalize on the current surge of interest in the Goryeo Dynasty. The book is one installment of a series of historical accounts released by the Society. In 1992, the organization published an overarching work titled *Korean History* and there have been suggestions to publish more chronologically specific and comprehensive accounts of Korea's history. Over the subsequent thirty years, these proposals came to fruition through various publications, including ten works featuring *A History of Ancient Korea*, *A History of Goryeo*, *A History of Joseon*, *A History of Modern Korea*, and *A History of Contemporary Korea*.

A History of Goryeo came into being as part of an effort to reflect on Korean history from a novel perspective. Previous researchers of the Goryeo Dynasty have frequently published articles and books for lectures on Goryeo history on an individual basis. However, institutional publications about the Goryeo Dynasty have been limited to separated publications named *Korean History* published by The National Institute of Korean History and Hangilsa respectively, the Korean Medieval History Society's *Lectures of Goryeo History*, and the Institute of Korean Historical Studies' *Korean History and the Future*. Likewise, the Korean History Society has published numerous joint studies about Goryeo, yet for the purpose of wider audiences, their sole publication has been *How People Lived in the Goryeo Dynasty* in 1997.

As such, much significance is being attributed to the Society's publication of *A History of Goryeo* from within and outside of academia. Due to the modern diversification and specification of research, publishing a work encompassing multiple fields and eras of history is considered difficult. Nonetheless, the combined efforts and mastery of the Society and specialized researchers have culminated in a project that demonstrates both expertise and popular appeal, written to answer the questions and demands of our current chapter in history.

Expertise of Various Specialists

A History of Goryeo was written by eight members of the Korean History Society's medieval department, specializing in various aspects of history. The overarching structure of the book is divided into sections along the lines of domestic (central and regional) and international politics, economy and society, and religion and philosophy, with each expert contributing a section. Each of the two volumes contains four sections, totaling eight chapters.

The subtitle for the first volume is "Politics and Economics." The first chapter of this volume, titled "Dynamic Development of Politics and Government" and written by Kim In-ho, surveys the period between the establishment of Goryeo and the establishment of Joseon through the analytical framework of changes in political power. Furthermore, the chapter examines key historical events in an attempt to identify period-specific political characteristics. In particular, one aim of the chapter is to better understand the overall course of Goryeo's politics by adhering more to empirical facts and events than academic interpretations in its presentation of history. This chapter further functions to provide the context that will aid the reader in understanding the subjects examined throughout the rest of the book.

The second chapter, titled "Organization and Operation of the Central Government" and written by Park Jae-woo, discusses the governmental system constructed around the monarch and his vassals. This chapter also serves to introduce the reader to the conditions that influenced research in this field, such as the "Goryeo aristocracy theory" that occupies debates regarding the institutional governmental history of Goryeo. By comparing the operative principles of Goryeo's central government to those of the Silla Dynasty, and thus tracking changes in bureaucracy and operational conditions, the chapter illuminates the Goryeo Dynasty's specific bureaucratic characteristics. Furthermore, it examines the communications between the monarch and vassals in the operation of the government and thus emphasizes the aspects of "consensus politics" that have become prevalent in recent research.

The third chapter, Yoon Kyung-jin's "Pluralistic Organization of Regional Government," examines the multi-layered structure of Goryeo's regional government system. The chapter explains that Goryeo's regional system followed the basic structure of the central government determining and managing outer regions through counties, prefectures, and their endemic administrative units,

further elaborating that Goryeo's government employed a three-tiered structure of local systems. This analysis adopts the popular research theories of Goryeo's multi-layered or pluralistic regional government system, which the author then explains to further comprehension and specificity.

The last chapter, titled "The Pluralistic Internationalism of East Asia" and written by Chu Myeong-yeop, observes international relations throughout the course of the Goryeo Dynasty. As is commonly understood, foreign relations in the Goryeo Dynasty are markedly different from the prevailing understanding of pre-modern East Asia's Sino-centric international relations, which the author chooses to explain through the concept of a "pluralistic international order." After overviewing the general style and structure of international relations in the era, the chapter then discusses the chronology of key events and changes in Goryeo's relations with the Khitan, Jurchen, Mongol, and Ming regimes, thus presenting a dynamic and dimensional account of Goryeo's foreign relations.

The second volume is subtitled "Society and Culture." Its first chapter, "Family, Relatives, and Caste" written by Lee Jong-seo, deals with familial relations and the caste system. Family and class provided the most fundamental circumstances and networks of personal and societal relationships for Goryeo citizens. As such, understanding these structures is tantamount to understanding the people of the Goryeo Dynasty, which the author helps the reader do through examining not only existing historical documentation but also a diverse range of evidence such as funerary epitaphs and family registers. Furthermore, this chapter is atypical in that it introduces relevant debates in academic research such as "the two-class structure" versus "the four-class structure" arguments and the competing social theories of "bureaucratic structure in Goryeo" versus "aristocratic structure in Goryeo."

The second chapter, Park Jin-hoon's "Ownership and Medieval Government of Land," discusses how the possession and sovereignty of land was structured in the early-to-mid Goryeo Dynasty. The chapter examines the significance and practices of the rights to own property in the agricultural economy of Goryeo and further elaborates on the establishment of land taxation and the practices of tax collection under the Stipend Land Law 田柴科. This chapter also provides perspective into the more dimensional aspects of land government as it devotes much space to examining why land ownership became a key platform for reformation theories that emerged in Goryeo after the 12th century, the social context, and significance of such.

The third chapter, titled “Buddhist Thought and Religious Institutions” and written by Kang Ho-seon, examines the Buddhist policies and organization of the Goryeo Dynasty. As evidenced by the national endorsement of Buddhism during the Goryeo Dynasty, Buddhism is an indelible part of the era’s philosophy, culture, politics, and any study of such. This chapter thus organizes the court and government’s policies regarding Buddhism in conjunction with the progress of establishing Buddhist religious institutions. It then goes on to track the mechanisms of how Buddhism aligned with the ruling class of Goryeo, the corruption of Buddhism in late Goryeo and the subsequent anti-Buddhist theories, as well as the Joseon Dynasty’s resultant policies regarding Buddhism.

The final chapter, Han Jeong-soo’s “Confucian Political Theory as Medieval Governance,” discusses Confucianism as a theory of governance in the Goryeo Dynasty. Following the unification of the Later Three States and the establishment of Goryeo, the directionality of the monarch-centric government was evident through the “Mandate of Heaven” philosophy and “people-centered” politics. Eventually, these trends passed through King Seongjong’s 成宗 reign and resulted in the intensification of Confucian politics and the observance of Confucian customs on a nationwide scale. Then, late in the Dynasty, the Confucianism of Goryeo gave way to widespread neo-Confucianism which subsequently became understood as the driving force behind reform and revolution. The chapter thus explains the characteristics of Goryeo Confucian thought as being the logical underpinnings of social reform and “medieval rationalism.”

Looking forward to a Modern Reading of the Goryeo Dynasty

As established in the introduction, *A History of Goryeo* is a book planned and published in pursuit of popularizing history by connecting the 21st century Korea and the Goryeo Dynasty. This ambition is evident throughout the book. Introducing the public to the factual image of Goryeo has been difficult due to the limited primary written material regarding the Goryeo Dynasty. Nevertheless, the book undertakes various efforts to transcend these limitations. First, it employs a plethora of rich visual materials in order to better represent its subjects. Readers will be able to easily visualize the dynasty through the

presentation of paintings and photographs in addition to quantifiable data such as tables and relationship charts. The fact that the book provides so many accessible visual materials while maintaining its subject-specific expertise is most likely the feature that most distinguishes it from previous publications on the Goryeo Dynasty.

This attention to accessibility is evident in the writing as well. Unlike specialized research documents or lecture notes, the prose of this book is considerably smoother, with footnotes being minimized for readability. Furthermore, each topic in the book is presented not only through facts and description but also with the use of abundant examples. Particularly the chapters dealing with social and economic topics such as family and class, and land and tax systems, make an effort to accompany conceptual descriptions with practical examples such as grave epitaphs or cases from *History of Goryeo* 高麗史 and *Essentials of Goryeo History* 高麗史節要. These inclusions are further evidence of the authors' attempts to make topics that may seem dry or imperceptible newly accessible and familiar to a wider breadth of readers.

These bold endeavors are the published culminations of a long-term plan by the Society. And as a result, the books are considered to have successfully appealed to both professionalism and popularity. However, these processes and their results have not been without several limitations and shortcomings.

Due to the participation of several specialists from related fields, repetitive descriptions are found frequently throughout the text. A chief example of this redundancy is the explanation of the controversy over the theories of aristocratic and bureaucratic structures, one of the key disputes in scholarship of the Goryeo Dynasty. Despite being once outlined in the chapter "Organization and Operation of the Central Government" of volume 1, the debate is explained again in the second volume's "Family, Relatives, and Caste." Very similar explanatory graphs and figures are even displayed twice in the text. Two chapters of volume 2, "Ownership and Medieval Government of Land" and "Confucian Political Theory as Medieval Governance" both contain pictures and descriptions of the Hwan-gu altar (The Altar to Worship Heaven 園丘壇), albeit from slightly different eras. These sorts of shortcomings can be attributed to the inherent drawbacks of multiple authorship and the scarcity of research data from the Goryeo period.

Given that the publication is the joint work of several researchers, the writing mechanisms are not consistent either. While some chapters introduced

the established trends and arguments of their relevant research fields in academia at large, others described academic or research issues based on the researcher's own perspective without mentioning broader context. Addition, while most of the chapters dealt with the period between the founding and the dissolution of the Goryeo Dynasty, the second and third chapters of volume 1, "Organization and Operation of the Central Government" and "Pluralistic Organization of Regional Government," barely make any mention of the late Goryeo period.

As such, the disparities in the authors' positions on specific topics are made plain to see. For example, the descriptions of the political forces pushing for neo-Confucian social reform in the late Goryeo Dynasty are expressed variably. They were referred to as *sinjin saryu* 新進士類 in the first volume's "Dynamic Development of Politics and Government" whereas in the second volume's "Ownership and Medieval Government of Land," they were called *sinjin sadaebu* 新進士大夫. Meanwhile, the final chapter of "Confucian Political Theory as Medieval Governance" did not name this group separately, only categorizing them as *yuja* 儒者, a general term for those who studied Confucianism during and after the Goryeo Dynasty. As the conceptual terminology used typically reflects the perspective of the researcher, these differences in the use of these terms illuminate the differences in the various researchers' positions on the same subjects.

Most of all, however, the methodology of the book is disappointing in that despite the aforementioned efforts towards innovative writing, the overall structure of its subjects remains thoroughly conventional. The various fields of the Goryeo Dynasty are classified as politics, economy, society, and culture, and such classifications that the writers themselves admit are "traditional." Of course, they explained that the reasons for doing so were that this type of classification was familiar to the public and was therefore efficient. Yet one wonders if this was indeed an effective method of writing.

The structure of each volume seems to reveal that it was not. The book was part of a general series on history, and therefore tried to encompass several familiar topics in its discussion of the Goryeo Dynasty. Thus, the first volume consisted of "politics and economics" and the second volume of "society and culture." However, a closer look at the content indicates that out of the eight topics, four or five discuss various aspects of politics and government (four chapters deal directly with domestic and foreign politics and the one that discusses Confucianist thought does so to a lesser degree). Though the first

volume is purportedly about “politics and economics,” it does not discuss the economic field at all (the economy is in fact covered as part of “society and culture” in the second volume), and is solely comprised of domestic and foreign politics. Simply put, the book’s structure devotes the vast majority of its content to the history of politics.

As mentioned earlier, the amount of research on the Goryeo Dynasty is steadily increasing. The fields of research are also expanding far beyond the previous focus on political and socioeconomic history, and research methods are evolving as well. In the field of political history, social networks, and space relations between political forces are being highlighted, while economic history is combining studies of commerce and trade with established traditions of land and taxation studies. Recently, researchers have been paying further attention to topics that may be of more immediate interest to the public such as interpersonal relationships, life necessities, and cultural history. Given these trends, adhering to “traditional” structures may in fact impose a threshold on public interest in and access to recent research achievements.

Therefore, we must be skeptical as to whether “tradition” can best serve the expectations of a general audience and whether it is the optimal approach for a popular history book for a new era. This can be reinforced when looking back at the publication of *A History of Joseon*, which was also organized as a general history book by the Korean History Society. That particular book described a variety of subjects in detail, divided into the first volume of “The State and the World,” and the second volume of “Human and Society” and thus along conventional macro and micro structures. Aforementioned problems of *A History of Goryeo* may be due to limited number of researchers who participated in its writing but it is nonetheless regrettable that the innovation of this project has been somewhat damped by its adherence to “traditional” structuring.

As if to mirror the issues present in the book, Korean society remains riddled with anachronistic ideological and regional conflicts, while economic and social polarization caused by neo-Liberalism has intensified the conflicts between generations and classes. Furthermore, the quality of individual lives is constantly threatened by mercenary capitalist profit logic and social corruption. This book was composed amid the acute self-doubt and questioning of the historians and scholars placed in such a modern Korean landscape. It was done so with the intent of reexamining Korean history and communicating with a public in the throes of an unforgiving society. It may be possible to find the

meaning of this book in that it is an attempt to address scholarship's original purpose of communicating with the society that shapes it and to raise the question of the proper way to reproduce and consume history.

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