BOOK REVIEW

Henrik H. SØRENSEN
Copenhagen Seminar for Buddhist Studies
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Serious scholarship on ancient Korea and in particular that dealing with state-formation during the early Three Kingdoms period (c. 300-668) has been wanting in the West, and not since the ground-breaking historical work of Kenneth Gardiner, and more recently the archaeological studies of Gina Barnes and Sarah Nelson, have we seen truly new and significant work emerge in the field. With Jonathan Best’s in-depth research into the *Paekche pongi* 百濟本紀 of the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記, we are now in a position to more fully appreciate the historical reality of the Paekche Kingdom. Furthermore, Best’s study is important as an intelligent example of how to challenge the claims of traditional scholarship as regards the rise and formation of early statehood and structured governance on the Korean Peninsula by native regimes.

Best’s comprehensive study consists of the following parts:

**Part I. A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche.** This part has been sub-divided into four chapters:

1. The *Samguk sagi* and Its Representation of Early Paekche History. Here the author discusses the Sagi as a historical source and problematicizes its various claims in order to access the extent of its reliability and trustworthiness.

2. The Hansǒng 漢城 Era: Paekche from 350 to 475.

3. From Recovery at Ungjin 熊津 to Disaster at Kuch’ŏn 狗川: Paekche from 475 to 554.

4. Royal Power during the Kingdom’s Final Century: Paekche from 554 to 660.

**Part II. The Paekche Annals of the *Samguk sagi*.** This part is the annotated translation of the Sagi’s 23rd to 28th chapters, i.e. those constituting the *Paekche pongi*.

Finally the book features as much as twenty three appendices, copious reference matter including a geographical glossary, a concordance, historical maps, a bibliography and an index complete with Chinese characters.

To anyone familiar with the previous research into Korea’s ancient history, in particular that of the Three Kingdoms, and the many problematic issues surrounding the making of a unified academic consensus, Jonathan Best’s study is of the utmost significance. There has been a long-standing, and at times almost hostile, debate among scholars in the field of Korean studies as regards the rise and historical realities of the Three Kingdoms period (actually “Four Kingdoms” if we include the Kaya 伽倻 kingdom(s) [c. 3rd–mid-6th cent.]), Koguryŏ 高句麗, Paekche 百濟 and Silla 新羅, a debate that reflects the political importance and cultural importance of this era. Not wishing to go too deep into this issue here, let it suffice to say that traditional Korean scholarship has had a tendency to accept at face value, i.e. as historical facts, the traditional datings for the founding of the three states as supplied by the *Samguk sagi* and other Korean sources, namely Koguryŏ (trad. 37 BCE–668.
Although Best keeps his focus on the history of the Paekche kingdom, his findings are of such a nature that he not only throws doubt on the above datings, but proves beyond any doubt that they are the results of later fabrications. The fact that parts of the Paekche pongi were obviously replicated, i.e. falsified, in order to fill out existing gaps in the historical chronology of the text, speaks for itself.

Best's project in effect consists of the re-writing, or rather a reconstruction of the history of Paekche. Given that he approaches his topic in a highly cautious and meticulous manner, carefully weighing the traditional data provided by the text against his own reasoning and extensive knowledge of the primary sources in Korean, Japanese and Chinese, he nevertheless allows himself the luxury of speculating whenever there are “historical” stumbling blocks on his path. His willingness to engage in thought-experimentation based on his keen sense of the nature of traditional discourses means that the reader is never presented with the unfolding of a straightforward or linear historical narrative. It may also be for this reason that Best has chosen to entitle his book “A History of Paekche” and not “The History of Paekche.”

The highly classical and text-historical approach taken by Best is further augmented and corroborated (whenever possible) by the inclusion in his argumentation of relevant archaeological and religious material. When compared with the majority of earlier studies on Paekche, this avenue provides new and useful dimensions for his historical analysis in which art-historical data including architecture, Buddhist images and other aspects of material culture, as well additional observations from the perspective of history of religion are compared. Moreover, the extant primary sources in Chinese and Japanese are consulted and discussed whenever possible.

Although much has been written by modern Korean scholars and others on the history of Paekche, Best has by and large chosen to ignore a substantial part of this material. In fact he barely makes use of secondary material written in Korean after the mid 1980s. I am here mainly thinking of the work in Korean by scholars such as Yang Ki-sok 梁起錫 and Yun Mu-pyong 尹武炳. I am also missing references to the work of Gina L. Barnes and Vladimir Tikhonov even though the work of both of these scholars in some ways touches upon his own concerns. Even a note on the studies by Hong Wontack 洪元卓 would have been in place. A discussion of the merits and demerits of these other studies could have provided Best’s prospective readers with further insights and perspectives on the historical reality of the Paekche Kingdom. The author undoubtedly had his own (good) reasons for circumnavigating the numerous nationalistic studies that have emerged in the past five decades or so. Nevertheless, it would have enhanced his study considerably had he at least told his readers in plain language why he does not address the issues and views raised by those scholars. As an example of this, it would have been better if Best had once and for all laid to rest the unfounded beliefs concerning the existence of native city-states sharing power with the Han colonies ruling over the north-western part of the Korean peninsula during the Eastern Han dynasty (209-220) and later. It goes without saying that Best does not accept the traditional datings for the Three Kingdoms (instead he uses ca. 300-668 CE as done by most Western scholars today),
but I would have welcomed an application of his rigorous and meticulous approach to these questions as well.

Best's study indicates that Buddhism was undoubtedly the single most significant, cultural feature of the Paekche Kingdom after the middle of the 5th century. However he only briefly touches upon the importance of religion and religious practice in the kingdom. The reason being, I suppose, that the Paekche pungi itself only mentions Buddhism in passing, and usually very briefly. Hence the author/translator may have felt that he did not need to go too deep into a discussion of this issue. Nevertheless, given the author's previous, mainly art-historical, research on Paekche Buddhism, he does devote some space to the large temple Mirük-sa 弥勒寺 in Iksan 益山 as well as a few other ruined structures.

However, it is in connection with Best's discussion of Buddhism that I feel inclined to add a few, critical comments. It appears that the author considers the Haedong kosōng chon 海東高僧傳 a genuine thirteenth-century work containing fragments of much older material. I have to disagree with this. Recent scholarship in both Australia, Europe and the US by John Jorgensen, Jörg Plassen and Gari Ledyard has strongly indicated that there are problems with the authenticity of this work. On the basis of their findings it appears that the work is a late nineteenth-century forgery, most likely from the hand of the controversial Korean monk Sasón 師璿, also known as Yi Hoegwang 李晦光(1862-1933). It was he who purportedly “found” the original manuscript of the Haedong kosōng chon. However, the manuscript itself has never been shown to the public(probably out of fear that it would easily be shown to be a forgery). As this dubious work is taken into account by Best several times in his discussion of Buddhism in Paekche, it does detract some from the value of those of his arguments that are based on information deriving from this source.

It has long since been accepted as problematic to use the Samguk yusa 三國遺事, a collection of mainly Buddhist legends dating from the late Koryó(13th cent.), as a source for valid historical information. Undoubtedly because of a scarcity of reliable data on Paekche Buddhism, Best utilizes information given in this compilation as if he is dealing with a historical source(pp.181-182, 188-191 etc.). This is in my opinion a problem given what we now know about the Yusa and its largely mythological nature. Data provided by the Yusa should in my view only be used as historical “pointers,” not as primary source material without qualification. To deduce the performance of certain Buddhist rituals based on excavated foundations of temple buildings in combination with information found in the Samguk yusa does not constitute historical data but speculation.

While the translation of the relevant parts of the Samguk sagi, i.e. the Paekche pungi etc., is both careful and to the point, the author has a tendency to go overboard with his abundant and copious footnotes. In fact the latter take up considerable more space that the translation of the main text itself. While this in itself does not constitute a problem, there are a number of redundancies as well as repetitions of information which the reader has already been given earlier.

A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche is a meticulous and classical study of a central phase in the history of Three Kingdoms Period, and as such it is a
must for anyone seriously interested in the ancient history of the Korean Peninsula. This book is useful for anyone seeking to obtain a meaningful understanding of how state-formation took place in ancient Korea, in particular that of the Paekche kingdom. Since Best’s study is both quietly controversial and at the same time doggedly text-critical in an almost conservative manner, it can be warmly recommended to those who have long since speculated along those very lines of which the book gives proof, as well as to those who have faithfully followed in the footsteps of the Korean historical tradition. Both are sure to come away with new and useful insights. More than any study before it, A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche should be taken as the history of Paekche.

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