Introduction

Of all fields of ancient Korean history, Koguryŏ can be said to be the least explored. But recently, particularly since the late 1980s, the easy accessibility of material from North Korea and China along with the possibility of conducting on-site investigations have caused an upsurge of interest in research on Koguryŏ history. In the future, once it becomes possible to do investigations in the North and pursue direct North-South academic exchanges, it is expected that research on Koguryŏ history will be further promoted.

Meanwhile, the results of domestic and overseas studies on Koguryŏ history show large differences of opinion among researchers in their understanding of major problems. These involve such areas as the credibility of the first half of the Koguryŏ chapters in *Samguk Sagi*, the Koguryŏ national structure and political system, the nature of its external relations, and the political changes which occurred after the middle of the sixth century CE. Inasmuch as these topics are crucial to forming an understanding of Koguryŏ history, it is not an exaggeration to say it would be difficult to expect profundity in Koguryŏ historical research without substantial debate on them. In this book the writer delves into these problems and attempts to present a modicum for understanding Koguryŏ history. Outlined here in the Introduction are the specific problem areas together with the writer’s approaches to their exploration.

Problems with the credibility of the main text of *Samguk Sagi*, especially the parts on the early period, have engendered an ongoing critical examination. In the case of the Koguryŏ text, there was some early mention of this state in Chinese history books and, unlike the Paekje and Shilla texts, the materials have been better substantiated by dint of critical review.

The pertinent viewpoints are roughly divided into three streams, the first of which is total disbelief. Grounded in the early modern position of scepticism with regard to the ancients, this discounts chapters with points considered irrational or doubtful and maintains that history must be reconstructed on the basis of precise records. This point of view was widely held in the first half of this century and remains current in certain academic quarters both at home and abroad.

Documentary critique is achieved by comparative examination of historical texts from adjoining countries. With Chinese records being the principal standard, divergence from these has been the critical indicator. *Samguk Sagi* is a relatively late compilation compared to Chinese materials which were actually or approximately contemporaneous. Also, our own histories may contain exaggerations or politically motivated falsifications while third-party accounts
serve the critical function of providing relative objectivity. The results of work grounded in this method and viewpoint show that the early portion of the main Koguryö text is largely a later fabrication or unreasonable and hence lacks credibility, and that the first verifiable king mentioned in the text was Sansang, the tenth monarch. According to this view, it follows that the credible period of Koguryö history did not begin until after the third century CE. Except for facts mentioned briefly in Chinese histories, the parts on earlier periods were consigned to the realm of the legendary or unknowable.¹

Modern scholarship is a rational pursuit based on critical examination of documentary evidence which is an essential process regardless of whether the conclusion is favourable or not. But if the ultimate objective of documentary critique is the recovery or reconstruction of history, gross disbelief is a method without an objective. Furthermore, it represents a conscious or unconscious discrimination against Korean historical accounts, resulting in certain oversights. There are problems even in the fundamental methodology of documentary critique. In terms of contemporaneousness, the records in Chinese histories do clearly have superior material value. At the same time, however, numerous problems arise when considering that they were the products of intermittent contact. That is all the more so in view of the fact that the Chinese records were not accompanied by thorough cross-checks.

The second stream is blanket acceptance, according to which the early part of the Koguryö Annals in Samguk Sagí can be credited as historical fact. That is to say, if we shake off preconceived notions regarding the actual written record, there is no reason to disbelieve what it says about Koguryö history. Inasmuch as the Annals are a record of the Koguryö period, they should rightly be credited unless there is a substantial basis for disbelief, with the premise that we must make a positive assessment of the level of Koguryö development at any given point. In this view, the part of the Annals which stated that Koguryö had a system of centralized authoritarian rule from early times must be accepted and therefore underpins any historical reconstruction. It maintains that apparent conflicts in sections in Sanguozhi Dongyi Zhuan and the Koguryö Annals in Samguk Sagí are either later additions or must be reinterpreted. This viewpoint could be a way out of the difficulties that arise from overall rejection, but it poses problems as well.

¹ The following are representative of this perspective:
Tsuda Sokichi, A Critique of Samguk Sagí Koguryö Annals, Mansei chiri rekishi kenkyu hokoku No. 9, 1922.
Ikeuchi Hiroshi, On the Early Koguryö Royal Lineage, Mansenshi Kenkyu, 1940.