Conclusion

Defining Periods in Koguryŏ History

In this book we have traced the development of Koguryŏ with the focus on its political history starting from its inception as a federated league to its growth into a centralized dominion. The following is a summary of each part.

In Part 1 we looked at the credibility of the first half of the contents of Samguk Sagi Koguryŏ Annals as the basic reference source. On this question there have been two drastically different views. One rejects everything in this source up until the early third century, while the other accepts everything. What we have done is to examine the question with an emphasis on the period of the Chumong foundation legend and the establishment of the early royal lineage.

The Chumong legend as presented in Samguk Sagi covers the two stages of his migration from East Puyŏ and his establishment of a new nation. By contrast, the Kwanggaeto Stele records Chumong’s origin as North Puyŏ. Of these two, the East Puyŏ version came later. Specifically, the East Puyŏ theory of origin dates from after the second half of the sixth century. Built on the existing North Puyŏ legend of origin, it consists of the East Puyŏ foundation legend plus newer stories on Hae Buru’s relocation of the capital and King Kŭmwa.

The North Puyŏ legend of origin borrows extensively from the Puyŏ legend of Tongmyŏng. Dating from after (North) Puyŏ was subjugated by Koguryŏ in the second half of the fourth century, it also recounts the nation’s early royal lineage. The fact that the North Puyŏ theory of origin dates from this period, perhaps when histories were compiled in the reign of King Sosurim, does not mean that the Chumong legend is a complete fabrication.

As recorded in Samguk Sagi Koguryŏ Annals, there is a kernel of truth in the basic plot of the Chumong legend which centres on the southward movement of groups from Puyŏ and the foundation of Koguryŏ by the Kyeru Bu royal house. And we should rethink the point that archaeological evidence that Koguryŏ was founded by migrant groups from the Puyŏ area has not been confirmed in the middle region of the Yalu River Basin. This is because the rise of the Chumong groups did not take the form of a sudden shift or conquest but was rather a slow and gradual melding with indigenous peoples. This aspect is covered in Samguk Sagi.

Early Koguryŏ royal lineage as recorded in Samguk Sagi was not worked out some time after the second half of the fifth century, as has been suggested. The controversial King Kogukch’ŏn was real, not imaginary. And by referring to Houhanshu Gaogouli Zhuan which was compiled in the second half of the
fifth century, we can see the line of T’aejo, Ch’ya Taewang and Shin Taewang derives from Koguryŏ historical tradition and was not simply a fabrication. In the second half of the fourth century, the kings following the T’aejo line of the late first and early second centuries were joined with the kings of the Ch’umo line prior to the middle of the first century, forming a single lineage with Ch’umo as progenitor. This is the lineage recorded on the Kwanggaet’o Stele as well as in Samguk Sagi.

Through this study, we can confirm that the early lineage recorded in Samguk Sagi is grounded in actual Koguryŏ tradition and that, although much of the Chumong legend underwent subsequent embellishments, it nonetheless reflects the basic historical facts. This understanding can also be applied to the passages in Samguk Sagi Koguryŏ Annals pertaining to the early period. In Part 1, we attempted to winnow the chaff from surviving accounts and backtrack from a central point to reconstruct the early stage of Koguryŏ history.

Here the political system of early Koguryŏ has been dubbed the ‘Bu system’ or, for lack of a better term, the ‘principality system’. Under this system, the Koguryŏ state consisted of several levels of semiautonomous entities. Their practical standing within the state structure depended on their political status, but the Five Bu were the key groups. The Bu were originally the tribes or chiefdoms that formed in the valleys of the Koguryŏ ancestral land in the central region of the Yalu River Basin. They eventually amalgamated into the five principalities. The royal house belonged to Kyeru Bu, with the other four being subjected to its rule and thus partially deprived of their erstwhile autonomy.

Each principality had its own officialdom to handle its internal affairs, and within each were smaller autonomous subprincipalities (Bu within Bu). The heads of each principality and subprincipality participated in affairs of state through a body known as the Council of Che-ga. In the Koguryŏ state structure, the people of the Five Bu were in a collectively superior position vis-à-vis subjugated peoples, thus being the rulers, but unity was sought through confederation. While subordinate peoples were subjects of the royal house and the Five Bu, they retained autonomy in the conduct of their internal affairs under the pre-existing leadership.

The specific form of their subordination varied from one group to another. Some were like marquisates and, as lesser confederates of the Koguryŏ Five Bu, they paid tribute and rendered military support. Weaker groups simply paid imposts to the Five Bu centred around the Kyeru Bu royal house. At that time, the name Koguryŏ could refer exclusively to the Five Bu or inclusively to The Five plus their subjugated peoples. This represents a cross-section of the Koguryŏ state structure under the principality system, which was similar to that of Shilla as seen in the Naengsu-bi and Pongp’yŏng-bi inscriptions.