
The dearth of Western studies on early Korea today would make any new publication of serious Western scholarly work on the subject welcome news. The book under review is, however, more than just another addition because of what it attempts to accomplish. Embarking on a bold revisionist inquiry, this study in fact tries to break new ground in the study of early Koryo, 918-1170 CE, particularly its worldview as related to foreign policy. Even if one may disagree with the outcome of such an undertaking, especially one based on a problematic underlying assumption, as this study is, he or she will still find it hard to ignore the novel challenge that the study poses with its painstakingly documented main arguments.

The major thesis Professor Remco E. Breuker postulates is that the early and middle Koryo society and its worldview rested on a pluralist ideology predicated on a Koryo identity formulated on the basis of its dynastic polity. This identity formulation, he asserts, also constituted a process through which there emerged a survival strategy for Koryo, then threatened by ‘foreign dominance’ (16) emanating from Song China as well as from the northern conquest dynasties of Liao (Khitan) and Jin (Jurchen). A pluralist thesis such as this is hitherto unheard of in the field of Korean studies.

Drawing from a wide range of sources on Koryo and related subjects, Breuker constructs his thesis on early to middle Koryo through an exhaustive investigation of the historical circumstances surrounding the establishment and maintenance of its pluralist community (Part I) and ideology (Part II). He then (Part III) tries to ‘demonstrate the concrete workings of [its] world view by analyzing [three] concrete examples: the perpetuation of a pluralist past in shared memories and histories in the Histories of the Three Kingdoms [Samguk sagi], the uses and abuses of the Ten injunctions [Hunyo sipcho] and, finally, the revolt of Myoch’ong [1135 CE] and the consequences the revolt… had for Koryo society and its self-perception’ (311).

Evidence amassed in support of Breuker’s thesis is impressive. Building on evidence extracted from various Korean and East Asian, as well as Western, historiographies on the subjects under study—and supplemented by even such abstract, theoretical studies as ones on pluralism by Peter L.
Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966),1 charter states by Victor Lieberman (2003),2 and more—Breuker argues for his revisionist interpretation in an erudite scholarly manner, employing an approach and a frame of reference that are audaciously novel. Yet, a question lingering from the early chapters of his work is: how credible is the evidence presented to support his pluralist thesis; is it truly, unequivocally convincing in all points?

Breuker opens his seminal investigation with an analysis of an important literary tendency in the use of Koryo’s collective names and designations that he has found in the early and middle Koryo historical writings. Because these collective terms contain ‘elements of a communal identity’ (52), Breuker discerns in their usage a purposeful avoidance of the official dynastic designation of Koryo, contrary to a consistent preference for Koryo’s other collective names and designations, such as Tongguk, Tongbang, Haedong, Ch’onggu, or Samhan—not to mention self-referring words like ponjo (‘this court’), abang (‘our country’), and the like (50). Out of such observations, Breuker construes an initial but crucial basis for the defining evidence of his pluralist thesis on an assumption that such a tendency as this was presumably a uniquely Koryo phenomenon with no apparent parallel development to be found in the writings of any other periods in Korea’s past. Thus, the existence of this tendency for him is historically verifiable in the early to middle Koryo writings. Yet, a question that must be raised here is: is such a tendency really a phenomenon limited to early Koryo writings? Breuker’s assumption unfortunately fails in validity for a deceptively simple reason: this tendency, contrary to his presumptive conclusion, existed as a quite common and general practice in the writings not only of Koryo but of other periods in traditional Korea as well.

To understand this phenomenon as a conventional writing style generally preferred by traditional Korean literati in the past, one must recall that Koryo literati in general, as did their counterparts in Silla and Choson, took pride in being literary stylists in their writing. It should also be recalled that in their literary pursuits these same literati were supposedly practicing poets as well. In general, the choice of figurative and metaphorical expressions, even in reference to the collective names of their kingdom over its