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THE GREAT BATTLE OF SALSU RIVER, 612

In the first half of the year 612, Sui dynasty China attempted to conquer Goguryeo, a pesky kingdom on its northeastern border, and threw at this the full might of its resources and skills. The final confrontation took place in what came to be known as the “Great Battle of Salsu River,” where Goguryeo forces maneuvered the Chinese army into a death trap that left barely 3,000 survivors out of an initial invasion force of over one million soldiers. This triumphant effort can be considered a formative event for a distinctive civilization, Korea, that would go on to withstand many such threats to its existence.

The Goguryeo kingdom (first century BCE to seventh century CE), the earliest political entity on the Korean peninsula supported by substantial and reliable historical records, came to rule a vast territory extending well into Manchuria. This geographical dominion, together with historical evidence of its military prowess, its cultural achievements, and its forms of political and religious authority, has led to the widespread embrace of this kingdom as the great representative of
early Korean civilization. This identification of Korea with Goguryeo, from which the name “Korea” itself is derived, has grown even stronger as a backlash against recent Chinese efforts to insert this kingdom into China’s own historical trajectory. Such an uneasy relationship, which undergirds a panoply of issues regarding Korean history and identity, has characterized Korea’s existence since the very beginning, which most Koreans actually believe far predated Goguryeo. The earliest years of Korean civilization are shrouded in sacred myths that invoke familiar themes—heavenly descent, early trials and tribulations, and so on—but also speak to distinctive features of Korean identity, especially in relation to the dominant civilization on the continent, China.

ANCIENT KOREA AND GOGURYEO

Goguryeo as a coherent political entity appears to have materialized out of the consolidation of proto-states and statelets in the first century BCE, long after the purported origins of Korean civilization itself, according to official and conventional histories. Indeed the Korean people supposedly began with the mythical progenitor, Dangun, born on the sacred Mount Baekdu through the mating of the son of the presiding god over the universe, and a bear transformed into a woman. This legend, the earliest extant version of which dates to the thirteenth century, relates that Dangun established the state of “Joseon” in the northern reaches of the peninsula and extending well into Manchuria. The curious precision of the date of this founding, 2333 BCE (Dangun is credited with a reign over Joseon lasting over 1500 years), has given license to round up the age of Korean civilization in today’s common parlance to 5000 years. Joseon, or “Old Joseon” as it is referred to today, supposedly gave way to smaller states that developed more features of higher civilization on the peninsula. Some of these earliest polities, such as Goguryeo, Buyeo, Okjeo, and the Three Han confederations (Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) on the southern half of the peninsula, made their way into descriptions of various “barbarians” in ancient Chinese histories.

Such accounts include colorful observations of these peoples’ clothing, food, customs, and rituals, which today provide valuable indications of primal religion and its place in these societies’ formation. The most common element in the foundation myths, including that of
Goguryeo, is the birth of the founder from an animalistic element, such as a bear or an egg. Mythologists detect in such features the influence of shamanism, which perceives the natural world as infused with spirits that affect human life and can be appeased only through a priestly shaman, the liaison to the spirit world. As in other early civilizations, the priest who claimed access to the spirits (or gods) enjoyed political power as well, and this appears to be reflected in these early states’ mythologies. Dangun, with his parentage in the spirit world, can thus be considered symbolic of the first Great Shaman, and the same could be said for Jumong, the mythical progenitor of Goguryeo, who is said to have hatched from an egg.

Such a preponderance of natural elements in these early societies’ spiritual life also likely reflected the dynamic influence of Korea’s environment. Anchored by the Taebaek mountain chain on the eastern side that functions as a geographical backbone, the peninsula is filled with mountains, which drive the rush of waters, nutrients, and energies down to the valleys and the scattered expanses of flat land. Rice-based agriculture, which arose before the formation of the ancient polities described above, came to be concentrated in the southern half of the peninsula, which boasts much broader plains, while the north features more rugged peaks and formidable plateaus, as well as longer bouts of cold. But the peninsula as a whole experiences four distinctive seasons as well as summer monsoons. The waters drain through several major rivers, such as the Han, Daedong, Cheongcheon, and Nakdong, that originate in the Taebaek Mountains and flow out to the Yellow Sea in the west or to the South Sea, which separates the peninsula from Japan. In relation to the Asian mainland, since the fifteenth century the Korean peninsula has been demarcated by the Amnok (Yalu) and Duman (Tumen) Rivers, which flow southwesterly and northeasterly, respectively, from their sources on Mount Baekdu, Korea’s tallest peak. The west and south coasts, which are relatively shallow, murky, and dotted with thousands of islands, contrast with the east coast, which borders the deep, expansive, and brilliant East Sea. Fishing, naturally, came to take a prominent place in Koreans’ economic and cultural development, as did in general the interaction, both physical and spiritual, with flowing water. It was the mountains, however, that both dominated the landscape and shaped core features of Korean civilization, serving as boundaries between culturally distinctive regions and corresponding broadly to the borders between major polities that emerged in the ancient era.
One of the consistent dynamics throughout Korean history, indeed, was the effort to overcome this naturally induced fragmentation, manifested in distinctive customs and collective identities, through administrative penetration and centralization. But political and military conquest did eventually integrate the disparate segments of the peninsula, and the mountains came to serve as channels of amalgamation, if not quite homogenization. Just as importantly, the geographical, topographical, and environmental features of the peninsula, which bleed into Manchuria, eventually came to be recognized as organically distinctive from that of China, especially the central plain where Chinese civilization was rooted. This also reinforced the sense of separation based on the customary, culinary, sartorial, and linguistic differences with the Middle Kingdom.

The legends of the early period, too, suggest a strong consciousness of China, though not necessarily one of opposition. The best-known version of the Dangun story, for example, recites that Dangun introduced administrative capacities to govern his realm. This suggests the need to legitimate this civilization as worthy of both Chinese-derived recognition, on the one hand, and autonomy from China, on the other. Indeed, the ability to resist absorption into China while benefiting from its cultural influence proved critical since the earliest times. This theme was exemplified by the well-known story, eventually integrated into the “Old Joseon” narrative, that Dangun was succeeded by a sage named Gija, an aristocratic refugee from Zhou dynasty China, a millennium before Goguryeo came into being. Gija, then, represented the authenticating presence of Chinese civilization, and until the twentieth century Koreans tended to believe that Dangun bestowed upon Korea its people and basic culture, while Gija gave Korea its high culture—and, presumably, its standing as a legitimate civilization. Nationalist sentiment in the modern era has nearly obliterated Gija, but unquestionably, whether real or fictitious, he symbolized the powerful self-consciousness vis-à-vis China from the earliest times of Korean civilization.

More historically tenable is the struggle Goguryeo waged, in its formative years, against the Chinese military presence on the Korean peninsula. In the corridors connecting the peninsula to the mainland, the Chinese Han dynasty established four commanderies over the surrounding territories, much as modern imperial powers governed their colonies. Like their contemporary Roman counterparts, these Chinese colonies transmitted the fruits of a more advanced culture and
technology to the “barbarians,” but they also had an uneasy relationship with these tribes, whom they both nominally ruled over and kept a wary distance from. Eventually the Lelang (Korean: Nangnang) Commandery, around present-day Pyongyang, would establish itself as the most formidable and durable of these colonial administrations. While Lelang survived the fall of the Han dynasty itself, Goguryeo, which had offered the most consistent peninsular resistance to Chinese dominion, overran it in the early fourth century. But soon Goguryeo itself had to contend with competing kingdoms on the peninsula that had undergone much the same process of consolidation from tribal confederations. All these early kingdoms, from their adoption of Buddhism and Chinese writing to their embrace of Confucian administrative models, reflected the blend of Chinese cultural influence and long-standing peninsular cultural behaviors. Among these polities, Goguryeo, thanks to its geographical proximity to China, remained the most wary of, even hostile to, Chinese influence.

THE RISE AND FALL OF GOGURYEO

Goguryeo seems not to have taken well to the notion of “eastern barbarians” (dongi), the original Chinese moniker for the peninsular tribes that eventually became a self-deprecating term of prestige for Koreans, who considered themselves “first among seconds” among the peoples surrounding China. After the fall of the Han dynasty in the early third century CE, China underwent centuries of fragmentation, and Goguryeo took advantage of this situation to grow increasingly powerful in northeast Asia and dominant on the peninsula. The martial vigor, economic vitality, and cultural advancement of this kingdom, so visible in the numerous extant tomb paintings (see text box), reflected well the impressive political and military power that Goguryeo amassed. The neighboring kingdoms were much younger and, until the latter part of the sixth century, left to contend for the southern half of the peninsula, while Goguryeo’s authority stretched to the far reaches of Manchuria.

An early peak in power came at the turn of the fifth century under the reign of King Gwanggaeto, whose exploits in pushing the boundaries of Goguryeo’s dominion in all directions befit his name, which means “extender of territory.” Goguryeo, however, did not trample over the entire peninsula, despite the chronic condition of competition and
struggle among the kingdoms. And the balance of power was maintained when Baekje and Silla, by the fifth century the other two remaining kingdoms, entered into a semi-formal alliance to check Goguryeo. Henceforth the borders between these three ebbed and flowed. Even Baekje, better known for its cultural achievements than for its martial prowess, managed to gain territorial victories. By the middle of the sixth century, however, it was the prickly, relatively late-blooming kingdom of Silla that began to ascend in this tripartite rivalry, which would not have endangered Goguryeo had it not been for the simultaneously ominous circumstances brewing in China.

In the year 581, after nearly four centuries of internal division, China was reunified by the Sui dynasty. Soon thereafter Sui rulers turned to one of the most nettlesome matters that had plagued Chinese polities, namely, what to do about the feisty kingdom to their northeast, Goguryeo. The Sui’s early years witnessed an effort on both sides to establish a working relationship, but soon internal developments within Goguryeo that the Sui emperor objected to led to a deterioration of relations. As with its drives to extend the Grand Canal and to fortify the Great Wall, the Sui leadership took a heavy-handed approach to the Goguryeo question. And as with these other campaigns, the efforts to conquer Goguryeo would contribute to the shortened life span of the Sui dynasty itself. In response to Goguryeo’s encroachment into the western banks of the Liao River, the first Chinese invasion attempt came in 598, amassing a force of 300,000 naval and ground soldiers that became bogged down in bad weather and worse luck on their way to the peninsula.

These heavy losses suffered by the Sui forces would pale in comparison to the calamities of the next major invasion attempt in 612, which would end with defeat at the Battle of Salsu River. The Chinese force mobilized for this campaign in the early part of the year was staggering in scale: over one million soldiers alone, not counting the accompanying manpower to move and feed them. The Korean historical records, based primarily on Chinese accounts, recount that the original six divisions of fighters marching together stretched for thirty miles. These armies managed eventually to overwhelm the Goguryeo defenses in the Laiodong border area. The Chinese, however, suffered enormous casualties and other losses (through, for example, sickness and runaways), enabling Goguryeo not only to stave off conquest but also to inflict severe damage on the invaders as they made their way to the
Goguryeo capital of Pyongyang. In their siege on Pyongyang, the Sui forces penetrated the outer walls of the city, but Goguryeo held them off enough to negotiate a peace settlement. This agreement would ostensibly signal Goguryeo’s capitulation and entrance into a subordinate tributary relationship with the Sui emperor, in return for Chinese withdrawal from the peninsula.

The Goguryeo commander assigned to negotiate with the Sui forces, Eulji Mundeok, would go down in Korean historical lore as one of its great heroes, not for surrendering to the Chinese—for this was but a ploy—but for destroying the Chinese army on its slow retreat back to China. As it trod northward along the western coast of the peninsula and started crossing the Salsu River (known as the Cheongcheon River today), Eulji unleashed a barrage of attacks on the rear flank, decimating the weary Chinese, who beat a frenzied retreat to the Yalu River. Legend has it that among the strategies Eulji deployed was the releasing of dammed water upriver that overwhelmed many of the Chinese soldiers as they attempted to cross the Salsu. In any case, the official Korean and Chinese histories note that the Sui army, which numbered over 300,000 soldiers laying siege to Pyongyang, had fewer than 3,000 remaining when it reached Liaodong several weeks later. This would go down as one of the monumental defeats in military history; rarely had such an enormous force—beginning with over a million combatants—suffered such devastation from a severely outmanned counterpart. For the Goguryeo, and for Koreans looking back on their history of constantly repelling foreign invaders, this episode constituted a victory of epic proportions.

The stupendous scale of this defeat did not deter the Sui emperor, however, from launching another invasion the next year, and yet another in 614, though both subsequent efforts also failed to subdue Goguryeo. The Sui dynasty began to collapse shortly thereafter, partly because of the enormous cost of these conquest attempts. The succeeding Chinese dynasty, the Tang, followed up with campaigns of its own in the 640s, but these, too, met with failure due to fierce resistance under the direction of Goguryeo’s military ruler, Yeon Gaesomun. It was evident that the Chinese would not be able to defeat this kingdom on their own, and indeed it took an alliance with the peninsular kingdom of Silla, which had chafed under Goguryeo’s imposing presence, for this to take place. The resolution to the intra-peninsular rivalry would finally come in 668 through the destruction of Goguryeo at the hands of the joint Silla–Tang forces.
The wall paintings of the Goguryeo tombs

The relative dearth of written documentation about Goguryeo is compensated by the wondrously vivid wall paintings found in more than a hundred tombs around the major Goguryeo settlements, in particular the Liaodong area and the capitals of Pyongyang and Gungnaeseong, on the banks of the Yalu River. These extraordinary paintings visually expound upon what the textual evidence hints at: a vigorous, sophisticated, and advanced civilization. That the images exist at all tells us that Goguryeo was a highly stratified society with a powerful and wealthy aristocracy, the highest members of whom, along with the royal families, left this world encased in elaborately decorated tombs. The paintings usually depict the buried person himself (or herself), accompanied by attendees drawn to smaller size but equally colorful in their dress. Other scenes testify to a martial vitality, with depictions of muscled strongmen, elaborately clad warriors, and immaculately dressed hunters on horseback aiming their bows at leaping deer and tigers. Great skill in archery and riding, indeed, would constitute signal features of Korean military culture thereafter.

The wall paintings also provide a strong indication of how the Goguryeo people, or at least its ruling class, viewed the greater cosmos, and of how their arts and architecture elegantly reflected this cosmology. Wondrous spirits abound, including the “four guardian deities” (sasin) of ancient East Asian folklore. There are also depictions of human-like figures in flowing robes representing the gods of the earth, moon, sun, and fire. Buddhist paintings tell us that this imported, systematic, and textual religion was making its presence felt in the religious order, likely melding with native folk practices and boasting an understanding of the movement of the heavens, as represented in the star charts painted onto the walls. Art was not limited just to the service of Goguryeo cosmology, though, as we see in the portrayals of musical and dance performances and other signs of a sophisticated aristocratic sensibility.

Depictions of the daily lives of the people, however, are equally revealing. We are treated to scenes of women going about their weaving activities, of fields and marketplaces with people dressed in polka-dotted clothing, and of an ancient form of ssireum, or Korean wrestling. We also get a strong sense of the economic advancement
of Goguryeo civilization, for amidst the displays of agricultural and handicraft goods are numerous appearances of wagons. Indeed, there is even a portrayal of what appears to be a “wagon goddess” wielding an oversized wheel like a magic wand. Based on the lack of such visual indicators and on the general condition of Korean roads thereafter, which were designed for walking—by both humans and horses—wagons seem to have diminished considerably in Korea’s subsequent socioeconomic order. Indeed, these extraordinary wall paintings suggest that transportation technologies might have been just one of many aspects of Korean civilization for which Goguryeo had achieved an early peak.

Image 1a  Scene from Goguryeo Tomb Painting, Corridor Eastern Wall, Deokheungni. (Courtesy of the Northeast Asia History Foundation.)

Image 1b  Scene from Goguryeo Tomb Painting, Front Room Wall, Deokheungni. (Courtesy of the Northeast Asia History Foundation.)
GOGURYEO AND KOREAN HISTORY

Until the twentieth century, Silla’s “unification” of the peninsula enjoyed the stamp of legitimacy in the prevailing Korean historical perspective, for each succeeding dynastic order traced its lineage ultimately to this seventh-century event. In the modern era, however, nationalist historical views deemed Silla’s action more a betrayal of the nation than a solution to centuries of peninsular balkanization, for it destroyed what many consider the truer representative of Korea’s ancient civilization, Goguryeo. Goguryeo appears to have had the most vibrant and advanced political, military, and cultural order, and, perhaps most importantly, Goguryeo was the ancient kingdom that refused to budge in the face of threats to peninsular autonomy. Goguryeo’s relentless resistance to the Chinese, then, stood in stark contrast to Silla’s behavior of turning to the Chinese for help.

The problem with this revisionist perspective, which is now orthodoxy in North Korea and widely accepted in South Korea, is that it overlooks the many examples of Goguryeo’s close ties to China and exaggerates the dependence of Silla or Baekje on outside forces. More importantly, it imposes a modern nation-centered perspective on the ancient era. There is little evidence suggesting that the people on the peninsula from the fourth to the seventh century perceived a common bond equivalent to a collective ethnic identity. In fact, the reordering of history to make it appear as such began after Silla’s conquest of the other two kingdoms in order to legitimate its dominion. The official historians of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392)—which, despite its very telling name, proclaimed itself also the rightful heir to Silla—further cemented the notion of a “Three Kingdoms” era by bestowing upon Silla the status of national unifier. Ironically, their successors in the twentieth century would turn this imagined unity into an insistence on the centrality not of Silla, but rather of Goguryeo.

Indeed, so widely accepted has this view become in Korea today, that to consider Goguryeo an unaligned kingdom based partly in the peninsula and partly in Manchuria is to provoke outrage. What contemporary Chinese historians have done, apparently with the blessings of the Chinese government, is to go one step further and imply that Goguryeo was actually part of Chinese history: Just as China today is one country with many ethnicities, China in the past was one country with many groups, including the people of Goguryeo. From the Koreans’ perspective, this amounts to robbing them of their own history, of the very kingdom
on which the name “Korea” itself is based. Lying beneath the surface, however, is also the latent Korean belief, of which the Chinese are aware, that Goguryeo can provide a lesson on how Koreans—eventually reunified, as warranted by the official national imperative—should deal with a resurgent, dominant China: at arm’s length, and with an assertiveness of Korea’s autonomy and interests. Such is the power of even ancient history in Korea today.
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