

# BALANCING RESEARCH ON ANCIENT KOREAN CULTURES

Dr. Kim Youngna  
Director, National Museum of Korea

## INTRODUCTION

For various reasons, some cultures of the past never seem to receive the proper evaluation that they deserve, often because of the political or economic climate in the present. However, at the same time, with changes to the social environment and context, cultures that were once almost forgotten can be revived, reexamined, and newly appreciated. The national museums of every country have a mission and responsibility to properly introduce and evaluate the entire history and culture of their respective nations. Through proactive research and diverse exhibitions, museums seek to uncover and re-evaluate the hidden and concealed aspects of history and culture, and the national museums of Korea have engaged in several such projects over the years. Among these, I would like to discuss one of the most recent examples, which is the renewed interest in restoring the culture of Baekje.

## HISTORY OF THE BAEKJE

In ancient times, three kingdoms competed for control of the Korean peninsula, such that the era from around the first century BCE to the seventh century CE is now known as the Three Kingdoms period. The three kingdoms were Goguryeo (37 BCE-668 CE), which occupied the northern region of the peninsula; Baekje (18 BCE-660 CE), in the southwest; and Silla (57 BCE-935 CE), in the southeast (Fig.1). In the beginning, Goguryeo and Baekje were the two strongest, but it was Silla that eventually prevailed and unified the territories. After forming an alliance with China's Tang Dynasty (618-907

CE), Silla conquered Baekje in 660 CE, followed by Goguryeo in 668 CE. Silla then fought to expel the Tang, their former allies. They succeeded in doing so in 676 CE. Silla subsequently ruled over the entire Korean peninsula until 935 CE.

Today, Silla is widely considered to be the representative culture of ancient Korea, being reverently acclaimed as "Korea's Golden Kingdom" and the "Kingdom of a Thousand Years." In accordance, the two most important Buddhist landmarks of Silla (the Seokguram Grotto and Bulguksa Temple) were designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1995 and thus, have received much international attention and recognition. In 2000, the city of Gyeongju, former capital of Silla, was also designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

## THE LACK OF RESEARCH ON BAEKJE KINGDOM

It is true that Silla persisted for almost a thousand years, developing a rich culture that incorporated elements from the Tang Dynasty and after unification, from West Asia. Given its prolonged duration, it is not surprising that there are more extant artefacts from Silla than from the conquered nations of Goguryeo and Baekje (Fig.2). However, Baekje had a thriving and advanced culture of its own, nourished in part by increased international trade and communication with both China and Japan. Therefore, contemporary researchers of the Three Kingdoms period have regularly asserted that Baekje culture has been somewhat overlooked in comparison to the Silla. As for Goguryeo, their territory was primarily located in the

region that is now North Korea, making it nearly impossible to examine relevant artefacts and resources. Thus, in this presentation, I will focus only on Baekje and Silla.

The general neglect of Baekje culture can be at least partially explained by the overall lack of extant records and artefacts related to Baekje. On the surface, this situation would not seem to be politically or economically based, but upon closer scrutiny, we can see how political and economic factors have in fact contributed to this paucity.

First, let's consider the lack of written records. The most significant source of histori-

cal records about the Three Kingdoms period is *Samguk Sagi* (三國史記, *History of the Three Kingdoms*), a primary text for the study of ancient Korean history and the oldest extant history book of Korea. Published in 1145, *Samguk Sagi* was compiled by order of King Injong (r. 1122-1146) of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392 CE), which had immediately succeeded Silla. The publication, which was led by Kim Busik, the representative scholar and politician of the time, clearly prioritized the history and culture of Silla over that of Goguryeo and Baekje.

The publishers were motivated to focus on Silla for various political reasons, not least of which was the fact that Kim Busik himself



Fig.1. Korean peninsula, mid-5th century  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea



Fig.2. Silla tombs and gold crown  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea

was a descendent of the Silla royal family, and had a strong political base in Gyeongju, the former capital of Silla. However the decision to emphasise Silla went beyond an individual's bias. In its early stages, Goryeo leaders affirmed the dynasty's links to Goguryeo, rather than to Silla but by the time that *Samguk Sagi* was published, Goryeo's historical rhetoric had begun to focus more on Silla, reflecting the increasing influence of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Moreover, the Goryeo Dynasty had only been established after brutal warfare with Hui-cha (i.e., Later Baekje, 900-936 CE), the proclaimed successors of Baekje. As such, Goryeo society still harbored deep animosity towards Baekje, which was reflected in the prioritization of Silla in the history of the Three Kingdoms.

As a result, in *Samguk Sagi*, the history of Silla receives about three times as much textual space as that of Baekje. Furthermore, much of the text dedicated to Baekje focuses on astronomical phenomena, weather anomalies, or natural disasters, so that the quality of the records is just as insufficient as the quantity. Given that *Samguk Sagi* was the most important historical record published by the government after the disintegration of the Three Kingdoms, the brevity and inadequacy of the Baekje historical records in that volume had a major impact on later studies of the period. Subsequent research on Baekje was quite limited, leading to distortions in the public understanding of the kingdom. In the early twentieth century, most research of ancient Korean history concentrated on Silla or Goguryeo, with research on Baekje tending to focus solely on the kingdom's cultural exchange with Japan.

There are also several hidden political and economic factors that have contributed to the lack of artefacts and material resources related to Baekje. It has been noted that Silla tombs generally have a more solid and protective

structure than Baekje tombs, making the latter more vulnerable to plunder. But this factor alone is not enough to explain the imbalance between the number of extant artefacts of Silla and Baekje. Ancient artefacts are usually discovered through excavations, and in Korea, the majority of excavations were conducted in the twentieth century, during the period of the nation's rapid industrialization. In particular, much of the industrial development of the 1970s and 1980s was concentrated in the southeast region of the country, which offered obvious geographical advantages for trade with two of Korea's most important commercial partners of the time, Japan and the United States. Notably, the southeast also happens to be the former territory of Silla. In brief, the increased industrial development in the southeast led to more excavations in that region, which naturally led to the discovery of more Silla artefacts.

#### A NEW DAWN FOR BAEKJE

Hence, for many decades, Baekje culture was largely overshadowed by that of Silla. The situation finally began to change in 1971, with the discovery and excavation of the tomb of King Muryeong (501-523CE) in Gongju, the second capital of Baekje (Fig.3). After being accidentally discovered during maintenance of a neighboring tomb, the tomb of King Muryeong was excavated by the National Museum of Korea. This excavation proved to be of enormous significance, because the tomb was found to contain two epitaph tablets that conveyed a wealth of crucial information, including the identity of the deceased (King Muryeong, Baekje's twenty-fifth king, and his queen) and details of their deaths and funerary processes. Furthermore, the tomb had never been plundered, and thus yielded numerous superb artefacts related to both the king and queen, including gold crowns and other jewellery (Fig.4). Indeed, the excavation of King Muryeong's tomb clearly demonstrated that Baekje's material culture was



Fig.3. Excavation of the Baekje tomb of King Muryeong (1971, Gongju, South Chungcheong Province)  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea



Fig.4. Uprights of gold crowns excavated from the Baekje tomb of King Muryeong  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea

every bit as advanced and resplendent as that of Silla.

Even so, further research and examination of Baekje culture was slow to progress. The situation only began to improve in 1999, when the National Museum of Korea held a special exhibition entitled *Baekje*, with the purpose of rectifying the relative neglect of Baekje history and culture through an in-depth examination.

As the first attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of Baekje, this exhibition featured about 700 archaeological artefacts and artworks, organised by chronology, theme,

and region. This exhibition, which was shown in the three cities of Seoul, Buyeo, and Daegu, markedly contributed to establishing a better understanding of Baekje's proper status in Korea's ancient history, to creating a new image of Baekje in the minds of the people, and to encouraging further research (Fig.5).

In addition, over the last thirty years or so, more excavations have been carried out in the southwest region of the Korean peninsula—the former territory of Baekje—leading to a greater accumulation of Baekje-related materials. Of course, as was the case with the earlier excavations in the former territory of Silla, the more



Fig.5. Gallery of Gongju National Museum (Items excavated from the tomb of King Muryeong)  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea

recent excavations in the southwest can also be linked to various political and economic factors. To be specific, since the 1990s, there has been an emphasis on economic and industrial development in western Korea for various reasons, including the increase of economic transactions with China and the decision to establish the city of Sejong as the de facto administrative capital of the nation. Just as significantly, the two consecutive presidential administrations that held office from 1998 to 2008 were each politically based in the western region, as opposed to previous governments that were based primarily in the southeast.

The recent period has also seen significant research projects and exhibitions on Baekje, particularly at Gongju National Museum and Buyeo National Museum, both of which are located in former capitals of Baekje. Both of these museums have continuously conducted research on Baekje culture, and each year, they have organised a special exhibition presenting the results of that research on specific themes, such as Baekje clothing, letters, measurements, metalcrafts, roof tiles, Buddhist temples, and

foreign exchange. The two museums have also carried out in-depth research on the items excavated from the tomb of King Muryeong, and have joined with museums in both China and Japan to organise international exhibitions about Baekje's exchange with those countries. Through such efforts, these national museums have led the advancement of research on Baekje, despite the insufficient number of researchers who are focusing on Baekje.

Furthermore, excavations of important Baekje remains have been conducted in Gongju, Buyeo, and Iksan. In particular, domestic and international interest in Baekje has been stirred by the discovery of the Baekje gilt-bronze incense burner at a Buddhist temple site in Neungsan-ri and of sarira reliquaries from stone pagodas at the temple sites of Wangheungsa and Mireuksa (Fig.6). Meanwhile, relevant research has been continuously conducted on the vital Baekje culture of the Yeongsan River valley, located in the southwest. As a result, in 2013, the National Museum of Korea opened its newest branch in Naju, also located in the former territory of Baekje.



Fig.6. Baekje gilt-bronze incense burner (Buyeo, South Chungcheong Province)  
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Korea

Due in large part to the excellent and diligent work of these national museums, Baekje culture is finally beginning to receive its due attention, such that it has attained a status almost equal to that of Silla. As the culmination of these long-term efforts, in early 2015, the former Baekje capitals of Gongju, Buyeo, and Iksan, collectively recognised as “Baekje Historic Areas,” were officially designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites. And work is now underway to construct the next branch of the National Museum of Korea in Iksan, another major Baekje city.

### CONCLUSION

In this discussion, I have tried to explain the crucial role that the national museums of Korea have played in shedding new light on the ancient kingdom of Baekje, which was long overdue for a thorough cultural and historical evaluation.

I hope that this case study can help demonstrate how contemporary notions about ancient cultures can be distorted by political and economic circumstances, and more importantly, how such distortions can be addressed and overcome.

With this in mind, I wish to conclude by stressing that our current understanding of Baekje culture could not have been achieved without collaborative research and exhibitions of related materials that are housed in museums of China and Japan. I hope that my sharing of these experiences can benefit other member museums that are now confronting similar problems.