

State Formation in Korea

Review >
Korea

Controversy surrounds the formation process of the Kaya Federation and the Three Kingdoms (Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla) on the Korean peninsula, which took place at around the beginning of the Christian era. In essence, two main approaches oppose each other; the historical approach, which relies on Chinese and Korean historical sources, and the archaeological approach, which relies on excavation data. The former dates the foundation of the Three Kingdoms to the first century BC, while the latter, based on archaeological evidence of social stratification in the form of sumptuously furnished mounded tombs, asserts that the Three Kingdoms did not emerge before the fourth century AD.

By Elisabeth Chabanol

In *State Formation in Korea*, Gina Barnes discusses the complex subject of the transition period from the proto-history to the history of the peninsula against the background of these two historical approaches. It is a complex subject on which few books have been published, this being the first ever book in a Western language to deal with it. Her application of a Western state formation studies framework to the subject, which has not previously been attempted, allows her to make the Korean question more easily comparable at a global level.

This collection of eight essays deals with specific questions that arose during Barnes' research into the 'background to the complex social development on the Japanese islands', but does not attempt to give a comprehensive answer to the various questions peculiar to the peninsula. We are left not with a book but, rather, with a collection of papers and articles, originally written between 1983 and 2000. Due to a lack of editing, the data are sometimes redundant, and have not always been brought up to date. The author has missed the opportunity to draw diverse results into a real, new, and

informative synthesis. An example is the theoretical second chapter, which observes that the 'problem of state formation in the southern Korean peninsula hinges on the integration of so-called Bronze Age and Iron Age data, and their integration requires the use of a settlement pattern concept which focuses on actual communities and their relation to each other in a broader political and social network' (p.89). It would have been much better had it been incorporated into the first chapter. There, the author reappraises the study of seven states (from Old Chosŏn to Silla) as they are accepted in Korean historical literature through the framework of the Western anthropological theory on the transformation of chiefdom-states, thus providing the book with a proper introduction.

The lack of integration of new data is particularly noticeable in the bibliography of the sixth chapter, not containing a single excavation report more recent than 1987. This is all the more regrettable because it presents a very interesting discussion of the different possible functions of the walled sites from the third century AD, and deals with an area of research which has recently undergone important developments, particu-

larly in the case of the Paekche Kingdom. For example, sites such as P'ungnap t'osŏng in southern Seoul, which addresses the question of the location of Paekche's first capital, should have been mentioned.

It is equally unfortunate that the question of the origin of some distinctive tombs from the south-west of the peninsula, which relate to both the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago, has not been examined. Barnes poses piquant questions relating to state formation in the peninsula, covering the different views of Korean and Japanese academic worlds. It is puzzling why she did not endeavour to express more frankly her own answers to these questions. While early on she asks the fundamental question whether '... the centralized entities of the Proto-Three Kingdoms period ... [were] organizationally continuous with or even related to the large states of the Three Kingdoms period' (p. 46), she does not treat this point regarding Paekche and Silla.

Moreover, despite her detailed study of armour, the author does not take a stance on the issue of the Horse-rider Theory and the Yamato/Wa aggression in Korea. When it comes to the origins

of Silla, she gives the impression to accept the theory that cultured horse-riders migrated to Kyŏngju without backing up her view with factual data.

The same is true for the seventh chapter, for Western readers the most useful part of this book, which looks at the debate between Korean and Japanese specialists about the entity known as Kaya. Unfortunately, Gina Barnes does not take a stance on the question of the existence of the Yamato/Wa outpost Minama.

The final chapter refers to the late development of the Silla kingdom. Here Barnes states that 'Silla's material cultural roots are indistinguishable from Kaya, arising from the early stoneware and tombs traditions of the Yŏngnam region' (p.201), presenting the difficult debate on ceramics and tomb typology. Again, it would have been interesting to know her own position on the evolution of the different structures of tombs and on the burials' dating; topics which are subject to very varied interpretations. Given the extent of her knowledge and comprehension of both Korean and Japanese archaeology and her own perspective, it would also have been fascinating had Barnes adopted her own definite position regarding all these matters.

Having said that, throughout the essays Barnes does give detailed explanations of the problems of concepts and terminology, such as tribal state, tribal league, chiefdom, tribal society, *guo*, kingdom, or walled-state. Furthermore, she reminds us that it is impossible to

assess the process of Korean state formation without a precise ceramic chronology. Several theories clash in the Korean academic world, and here we see Barnes use her expertise to analyse different ceramic technologies.

In view of the number of recent excavations relating to the period of state formation on the Korean peninsula, there is no doubt it would take a full team to arrive at a good synthesis on the matter of this critical transition from the proto-historical period to the historical period. Meanwhile, Barnes' book should not be neglected: it provides a wealth of information and is the pioneer publication in a Western language on some important questions related to this period. It will serve as a necessary tool for students who do not have direct access to the Korean sources and wish to specialize in ancient periods of North-East Asia, and to proto-historians working on other geographic areas who wish to learn about the peninsula. ◀

- Barnes, Gina, *State Formation in Korea: Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*. (Durham East Asia Studies), Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press (2001), pp. 245, ISBN 0-7007-1323-9

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