

## A Study of 『East Sea』 in Epigraph

*Lee Sang-Tae*

(Chair-Professor, Korea International Culture University of Graduate, Korea)

### I. Introduction

Originally, the natural elements such as mountains, rivers, and seas which surround us did not have any names. Rather, their names emerged as part of the process through which man developed civilizations that began to refer to these elements of nature by appellations that were rooted in their own cultural awareness. As such, the names of mountains, rivers, and seas can be regarded as expressions of the consciousness of those who resided in these places, and as remains of their cultures.

As the Korean peninsula is surrounded by water on three sides, Koreans began from early onwards to have a profound interest in these seas, which they called the East Sea (*donghae*), West Sea (*seohae*), and South Sea (*namhae*). In this regard, the first references to an 'East Sea' can be found in the records detailing the foundation of Goguryeo by King Dongmyeong. The record states, "The establishment of Goguryeo in the lands previously occupied by North Buyeo (Bukbuyeo, 北夫餘) have resulted in the latter relocating its capital to Gaseopwon (迦葉原) in the East Sea region." This record was compiled in BC 59, or before the foundation of Silla. In other words, Koreans have utilized the name East Sea, which first began to be used in BC 59, or before the foundation of the Three Kingdoms (Silla, Baekje, and Goguryeo), for some 2,000 years.

Another pertinent example displaying how long the Korean nation has used the name East Sea is King Gwanggaeto's Monument established in 414 by King Jangsu to commemorate the achievements of his father. The 8<sup>th</sup> verse of the third section of the monument reads, "Three residents from the East Sea area shall be selected to protect the grave." Thus, the name East Sea was also used in epigraphs established during the 5<sup>th</sup> century to refer to the sea that lies to the east of the Korean peninsula.

The name East Sea also appears on numerous other existing epigraphs. In this regard, this study undertakes the task of analyzing the epigraphs on which the name East Sea appears, when these pieces were produced, and how such inscriptions were produced. Furthermore, an attempt is also made to reveal the extent to which the use of the name East Sea is deeply engrained in the consciousness and traditions of the Korean nation.

### II. Epigraphs on which the name East Sea is inscribed

Several thousand epigraphs have been preserved in Korea. Of these, 122 feature the name 'East Sea.' As many of these epigraphs have yet to be opened to the public, only 43 were employed as part of the analysis conducted herein.

## 1. Chronology of the epigraphs on which the name East Sea appears

King Gwanggaeto's Monument is the oldest existing epigraph on which the name East Sea has been inscribed. This monument was created by King Jangsu in 414 in order to commemorate his father King Gwanggaeto's achievements. The name East Sea appears on the third section of this monument. Meanwhile, the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterized by the wars of unification amongst the three kingdoms. This focus on warfare resulted in few epigraphs being produced during this period. In this regard, no epigraphs featuring the name East Sea are known to have been created during this volatile era. This however changed during the 8<sup>th</sup> century characterized by Silla's unification of the three kingdoms and the subsequent advent of stability on the Korean peninsula. This was a period of tremendous cultural development. All in all, the name East Sea appears on four epigraphs erected during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It also figures prominently in three epigraphs erected during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and six constructed during the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The advent of an era of national crisis during the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries characterized by such events as the ardent resistance to the Mongols resulted in very few epigraphs being manufactured during this period. Moreover, none of the epigraphs produced at that time included the name East Sea.

The founding of Joseon and subsequent advent of a period of relative stability from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards ushered in a period of cultural development marked by the production of many epigraphs. The name East Sea is evident in six epigraphs produced during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, two created during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, six in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, seven each in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and one in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Analysis of references to the East Sea by type of epigraph

Separating the 43 epigraphs analyzed herein by type we find that more than half (25) of these epigraphs consist of those found on monuments. These consist of three royal monuments commemorating the achievements of the owner of the tomb, one monument to a prince, two monuments to military generals, eleven monuments to civil officials, and eight monuments to monks. The royal monuments consist of King Gwanggaeto's Monument, the Royal Monument for the Founder of Silla, and the *Najeongbi* (羅井碑, Monument to Najeong Well). Meanwhile, the monument to a prince is known as the Stele for Yi Bang-beon. This structure is dedicated to a prince who was sacrificed during the First Princely Coup (*wangjaui nan*).

The steles for military generals consist of the Stele Extolling the Merits and Virtues of General Sun, a refugee from Baekje who went on to achieve great things during the Tang dynasty, and the Grave Stele for General Zhang Jian-zhang a Tang-era general who also served as a royal envoy to Balhae.

The steles devoted to civil officials consist of the grave steles for Park Won-gye, Yi In-bok, An Bo, and Yu Suk, all of whom lived during the final period of Goryeo; stone tablets dedicated to Yi Guk-ju and Yi Jung-nyang, the stele for Mok Seo-heum, stone tablet of Heo Mok, and stele for Yun Seon-do, all of whom lived during the mid-Joseon era; and the stone tablet of Kim Jung-gu and the stele for Yi San-hae. There are also four steles attached to memorial halls for great scholars (*seowonbi*), namely the *Unam seowonbi*, *Obong seowonbi*, *Sanyang seowonbi*, and *Hwasanjae gijeokbi*.

The epigraphs commemorating monks erected during the final period of Unified Silla include the epigraph of Buddhist Monk Nanghye, epigraph of Great Monk Jijeung, epigraph of Great Meditation (*seon*) Teacher Jajeok, epigraph of Great Monk Beopgyeong, epigraph of Great Monk Dong Jin, epigraph of Great Monk Jeong Jin. Meanwhile, those commemorating monks which were erected during the final period of Goryeo include the epigraphs of National Preceptor Wonmyeong and Jingak.

Meanwhile, the Buddhism related epigraphs on which the name East Sea appear include a record detailing the creation of the Divine Bell of King Seongdeok, records relating to the Maitreya Statue and Amitabha Statue located in the temple of Gamsansa, a monument in the temple of Baengnyeonsa recording the history of the temple's architecture, and epigraphs from the temples of Gwangbeopsa, Sinheungsa, and Sungboksa.

One also finds epigraphs in which the architecture and history of fortresses are detailed that include references to the East Sea. These include the Old Monument of Tagajo (多賀城) in Japan and the Monument to Cheolong Fortress in Yeongbyeon, North Korea.

There are also steles which record the details regarding victories in battle that include references to the East Sea. These include the records contained on the Jojoam Rock and the epigraph to the Three Royal Retainers (Choe Gye, Choe In, and Choe Dong-bo), both of which record the details of victories achieved on the battlefield during the Hideyoshi Invasions (1592–1598).

The East Sea was also perceived by Koreans as an object to be worshipped. For instance, during the Goryeo era, Koreans built a temple in which the god of the East Sea was worshipped, and also implemented rituals to this deity at the national level. To this day, there is a temple in Yangyang, Gangwon Province in which this god of the East Sea is enshrined. More to the point, this temple features the gravestone of the Dragon King of the East Sea. This gravestone has been restored on several occasions, the details of which are contained in an adjoining stele. Finally, a so-called 'epigraph to the East Sea' praising this vast expanse can still be found in Samcheok, Gangwon Province.

As such, the Korean people have always had an intimate and profound relationship with the East Sea.

### III. Analysis of Individual Epigraphs

#### 1. King Gwanggaeto's Monument

King Gwanggaeto's Monument was erected by King Jangsu during the 5<sup>th</sup> century to commemorate the achievements of his father. It is located in the Chinese city of Jian in Jilin Province. Standing 6.39 m tall, the imposing structure is made of granite. It is composed of 1,775 characters written in clerical script (*lishu*, 隸書). The contents of the monument can be divided into three sections: While the first deals with the foundation of Goguryeo and King Gwanggaeto's achievements, the second describes King Gwanggaeto's conquering activities. Meanwhile, the third part describes the protectors of the grave and their hometowns, as well as related laws and regulations. The name East Sea appears in this third part. As it includes a wealth of historical materials on topics such as Goguryeo's territorial expansion during the reign of King Gwanggaeto, Goguryeo's perception of the world during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and the international relations between the three kingdoms

and Japan, this monument constitutes one of the most important historical materials with which to study the ancient history of Korea.

## **2. Divine Bell of King Seongdeok**

The Divine Bell of King Seongdeok is also called the Bell of Bongdeoksa or the Emillae Bell. This bronze bell was cast during the 8<sup>th</sup> century to commemorate the achievements of King Seongdeok and to pray for the prosperity of the royal family and the kingdom. It is the largest existing bronze bell in Korea and is regarded as being representative of the Silla era in terms of its period of manufacture, artistic style, and sound quality. It has been designated as Korean National Treasure No. 29. It stands 333 cm tall and has a diameter of 227 cm. It consists of a preface of 630 characters and a main text of 200 characters. The name East Sea appears in the main text, where it is described as a divine place where Silla was established.

## **3. Record Relating to the Sculpture of Maitreya Statue in Gamsansa**

Gamsansa's Maitreya Stature, which was discovered in 1916, is now housed in the National Museum of Korea. The process used to establish this statue is described in the back of the statue's halo. According to this record, this statue was produced by Kim Ji-seong to pray for his parents' eternal happiness. The record also details how Kim spread his mother's ashes in the East Sea.

## **4. Epigraph of Buddhist Monk Nanghye in Seongjusa**

This epigraph, which is located on the site of Seongjusa in Boryeong-gun Chungnam Province, was manufactured during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It stands 251 cm tall and 148 cm wide. It consists of 5,120 characters, all of which are perfectly legible. This epigraph, which constituted a part of the Four Mountain Inscriptions created by Choe Chi-won, was designated as Korean National Treasure No. 8. It is meant to honor the Buddhist Monk Nanghye, a prince who after having been forced out during the competition to seize the royal throne became a great monk who inspired many disciples. In this instance, the term East Sea was used to denote Silla.

## **5. Epigraph of Great Monk Jijeung in Bongamsa**

This epigraph manufactured during the 9<sup>th</sup> century is situated within the walls of Bongamsa, a temple located in the city of Mungyeong in Gyeongbuk Province. Designated as Treasure No. 138, the structure stands 273 cm tall, 164 cm wide, and is 23 cm thick. Great Monk Jijeung, who was from the *jingol* (true bone lineage) class, established the Huiyang Sect, one of the nine sects of Seon (meditation) Buddhism. This epigraph represents an important source of information on the history of Silla's Seon Buddhism. It has also been used as a basic material with which to study such topics as the land ownership system during the Silla era, and the characteristics of private land ownership. In this epigraph, the term East Sea is used to refer to the sea that lay to the east of Silla's territory.

## 6. Epigraph of Great Meditation (*seon*) Teacher Jajeok in Myeongbongsa

This epigraph commemorates the life of the 10<sup>th</sup> century monk Great Meditation Teacher Jajeok. It consists of 30 lines, each with 59 characters. The epigraph provides details about the life of the monk Jajeok, who studied the teachings of Buddha under Great Monk Jingyeong of the Bongnim Sect. The use of the *idu* (吏讀, Korean phonetic system used to read Chinese characters) writing system in this epigraph has resulted in it being used as an important source of information on the nature of official documents during the Goryeo era and the *idu* system.

The epigraph details how Jingyeong, who was Jajeok's teacher, educated many disciples in the East Sea area after having returned from Tang.

## 7. Epigraph of Great Meditation Teacher Daebogwang in Bogwangsa

This epigraph established during the 14<sup>th</sup> century describes the life of National Preceptor Wonmyeong and the process of rebuilding the temple of Bogwangsa. It includes a passage detailing Wonmyeong's amazement at the extent to which Buddhism, which had originated from India in the west, had become popular in the east, having been introduced all the way to the ends of the East Sea that lay hundreds of thousands of *li* away from India.

## 8. Grave Stele of Yu Suk

Yu Suk was a civil official during the 14<sup>th</sup> century or final period of Goryeo. He is known to have helped King Gongmin and to have carried out many meritorious deeds. He was also a good filial son toward his parents. This stele contains the journal of a trip to Geumgangsan and the East Sea area which Yu Suk took along with the father of Yi Saek, Yi Gok. The actual inscriptions found on this grave stele were made by Yi Saek.

## 9. Stele of Mok Seo-heum

This stele was erected in honor of Mok Seo-heum, a civil official during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Having conducted meritorious deeds during the Second Manchu Invasion of 1636, he was subsequently appointed to the position of magistrate of Yangyang. The inscription on this stele describes Yangyang as an isolated town in the East Sea area, and its residents as strong-willed and treacherous individuals who were difficult to rule.

## 10. Stele for Yi Bang-beon

This stele was established for Prince Yi Bang-beon during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The seventh son of King Taejo, Yi was assassinated during the First Princely Coup (*wangjauin*) in 1398. His position was eventually restored, and he was conferred the posthumous honorary title of Muan daegun. This stele includes an inscription which reads that had he not been assassinated, Yi Bang-beon would have enjoyed a life of wealth and honor akin to that of King Song of the East Sea, while also exhibiting a great sense of fraternity towards his brothers.

#### IV. East Sea related epigraphs

The *Donghae myojungsu gisabi* (東海廟重修紀事碑) and *Cheokju donghaebi* (陟州東海碑) are two epigraphs which directly praise the East Sea.

These two epigraphs include praise for the East Sea and details of related ritual ceremonies.

##### 1. *Donghae myojungsu gisabi* (東海廟重修紀事碑)

The fact that the Korean peninsula is surrounded by water on three sides has allowed its inhabitants to benefit greatly from the sea through such means as fishing. In this regard, the government began from the Goryeo era onwards to host ritual ceremonies to thank the seas. Shrines were erected in the West, South, and East Sea towns of Pungcheon, Yeongam, and Yangyang in order to pray for the nation's safety, prosperity, and bountiful harvests. The government routinely sent offerings as part of the ritual ceremonies conducted at these shrines in February and August of every year.

Later on, the East Sea was granted the title of King Gwangdeok, the West Sea of King Gwangyun, and the South Sea that of King Gwangni. In this regard, ritual ceremonies were thereafter carried out for these three seas that matched those conducted for feudal lords. The Shrine for the East Sea (*Donghae sinmyo*) is located in the Yangyang area.

This stele reads, "The sea has always been good to us the nation of the East. Please continue to grant us an abundance of fish, bountiful harvests, and long prosperous lives. May the sea be calm for a long, long period and continue to be peaceful until the Yellow River becomes clear."

##### 2. *Cheokju donghaebi* (陟州東海碑)

This stele erected in Samcheok, Gangwon Province during the 18<sup>th</sup> century stands 175cm tall and is 76cm wide.

This period was one in which the inhabitants of this province found themselves suffering greatly because of heavy waves that regularly crashed into their villages. The advent of such floods forced the residents into despair. Overcome by a great sense of sorrow at this pitiful situation, the Magistrate of Samcheok Heo Mok decided to erect this stele containing a mysterious and uniquely worded inscription. Once this stele had been erected, the sea mysteriously became calm and the residents no longer found themselves having to fear its wrath. Believing that its contents had effectively driven away the waves, this stele also came to be called '*toejobi*'. The inscription on the stele reads as follows:

All kinds of streams and rivers flow into the great sea as it widens endlessly. The broad, boundless waves of the sea reach to the skies, and clouds gather in the eastern reaches of the sea. The morning sunlight is bright and dazzling and filled with reddish light. Word of the virtue of its sage kings has spread to far-off countries. Barbarian nations dispatched envoys. All obey its commands.

Great and bright, its rule is broad and profound, and its achievements will glow forever."

## V. Conclusion

As the Korean peninsula is surrounded by water on three sides, Koreans began from early onwards to have a profound interest in these seas, which they called the East Sea (*donghae*), West Sea (*seohae*), and South Sea (*namhae*). In this regard, the first references to an 'East Sea' can be found in the records detailing the foundation of Goguryeo by King Dongmyeong. The record says, "The establishment of Goguryeo in the lands previously occupied by North Buyeo (Bukbuyeo, 北夫餘) have resulted in the latter relocating its capital to Gaseopwon (迦葉原) in the East Sea region." This record was compiled in BC 59, or before the foundation of Silla. In other words, Koreans have used the name East Sea, which began to be used in BC 59, or before the foundation of the Three Kingdoms (Silla, Baekje, and Goguryeo), for some 2,000 years.

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