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A History of Korea

An Episodic Narrative

Kyung Moon Hwang

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Queen Söndök and Silla's Unification of Korea

CHRONOLOGY

- 632 Death of King Chinp'yöng and ascent of Queen Söndök
- 642 Silla embassy to Koguryö to request help against Paekche
- 643 Silla embassy to Tang China to request help against Paekche and Koguryö
- 647 Death of Queen Söndök and ascent of Queen Chindök
- 654 Death of Queen Chindök and ascent of King Muryö (Kim Ch'unch'u)
- 660 Silla-Tang conquest of Paekche, led by General Kim Yüsin
- 668 Silla-Tang conquest of Koguryö, unification of the Peninsula
- 675 End of Silla-Tang War for control over Korean Peninsula

SILLA'S DISPATCH OF A TRIBUTE EMBASSY TO CHINA, 643

Feeling besieged, the monarch of the kingdom of Silla sent a tributary embassy to the emperor of Tang dynasty China in 643 with an urgent request for Chinese assistance in fending off the unrelenting incursions from the other two peninsular powers, Koguryö and Paekche. The Chinese emperor, sensing another opportunity to strike Koguryö, vowed to attack the two adversaries and even offered thousands of Chinese army uniforms so that Silla soldiers could intimidate their opponents on the battlefield. The emperor's third suggestion, though, was startling: Silla should accept a Chinese prince as its interim ruler, whose presence would put an end to Silla's misfortune—a misfortune that, according to the emperor, was due to its monarch. It was not the Silla ruler's actions or policies that were objectionable, but rather the ruler's gender: Silla's monarch was Queen Söndök, the first of three female rulers of Silla.

Significantly for the subsequent history of Korea, this brazen push to reestablish a Chinese foothold on the peninsula was (respectfully) resisted by Silla, despite the Tang emperor's support for the anti-Söndök elements within the Silla ruling order. Queen Söndök managed to weather this storm, and during her reign from 632 to 647, Silla proceeded not only to survive but to thrive. It further centralized state rule, sponsored the continuing growth of Buddhism, nurtured the flowering of science and culture, and solidified the Silla state and military power through the cultivation of skillful people who eventually were to lead the country to peninsular supremacy. Tang China would be Silla's indispensable partner in the wars of unification, but as shown by the pressures exerted upon Queen Söndök's rule, Silla had to remain wary of ultimate Chinese designs. The Sillan leaders' capacity to walk this diplomatic tightrope between assistance and autonomy would prove instrumental in securing the peninsula's unification under Silla domination. That this process would begin during the reign of a female monarch also reveals a great deal about distinctive cultural patterns inscribed onto the peninsula by not only Silla but all of the ancient civilizations on the peninsula. Indeed, Queen Söndök herself would embody many of these qualities, including the tantalizing signs that, in regard to the role and status of females, Silla might have been ahead of its time.

BUDDHISM AND POWER

Queen Söndök's most notable accomplishment might have been to achieve an early peak in the relationship between Korean political and social power, on the one hand, and royal sponsorship of the Buddhist establishment on the other. Buddhism, a religion preaching the path of overcoming human suffering through ritual, action, study, and meditation—just as its founder, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), had done in the sixth century BCE—had by the fourth century CE traversed its way eastward through northern India, Tibet, China, and the Korean peninsula, on its way eventually toward Japan. Through this process this religion gained a tremendous following, usually first among learned elites, who developed different approaches and perspectives in line with their specific cultural heritage. They then disseminated the modified forms to the laity and usually persuaded the ruling groups

to embrace this powerfully spiritual and systematic set of teachings. The political rulers, in turn, found Buddhism, in particular the Buddhist clergy, a useful ally in further consolidating their domination and in heightening the aura of their authority. Eventually, political domination went hand-in-hand with patronage of Buddhism.

The authoritative twelfth-century Korean historical source, *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi*), relates that an especially large number of Buddhist temples was erected during Söndök's reign, firmly establishing a defining pattern of Korean history until the fourteenth century. Not coincidentally, some of the oldest surviving artifacts of Korean civilization are stone pagodas that dot the countryside and Buddhist temples, some dating back to the ancient era even if the wooden buildings that surround them do not. Queen Söndök, like other monarchs on the peninsula, appears to have benefited from this association with the religious order, for it provided support for her claims to monarchical authority. In fact, the "Mirük" or Maitreya sect of Buddhism that prevailed on the peninsula considered the monarch the embodiment of the Buddha himself. The ancient Korean rulers, even those of systematic, sophisticated states like Silla, basked in this religious eminence, which accompanied the increasing centralization of state authority visible in all three kingdoms.

For some leaders, like Söndök, the historical perception of their rule appears to have been firmly wedded to their spiritual mystique. The *Tales of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa*), a work dating from the thirteenth century that mostly recounts the often legendary history of Buddhism in ancient Korea, provides glimpses of this relationship. Söndök is said to have issued three prophecies during her reign, all coming true: one concerning a cryptic gift from the Chinese emperor, another suspecting an imminent Paekche attack, and finally a prediction of the manner of her own death. The content of these prophecies reflects important issues that surrounded her reign, as we will see below. But the overarching impression left behind by these stories is of a skillful, sagacious monarch whose glories were reflected in her mystical powers. It was if she was indeed a reincarnation of the Buddha,

or at least the embodiment of the blending of Buddhist teachings and native shamanistic practices.

Buddhism exerted its influence also through the great standing that China enjoyed as the perceived center of high culture. The Three Kingdoms each sent students and scholars to the Middle Kingdom to gain exposure to advanced Buddhist learning. The most prominent and gifted scholar-monk of Silla was a younger contemporary of Queen Söndök, Wönhyo (617–86). Indeed Wönhyo is still the most celebrated figure in Korean Buddhist history, so influential was his attempt to synthesize Buddhist teachings into a more comprehensible form. He could be characterized as the first great Korean popularizer of this foreign religion, and his influence extended all the way to Japan, which became a depository of continental civilization as filtered largely through the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula. Such activity was not limited to Buddhism, however; other aspects of Chinese culture were eagerly absorbed (and transmitted), including the complicated but impressively ordered set of teachings about government and politics that we know as Confucianism. According to legend, Wönhyo's own son, Söl Ch'ong (660–730), established himself as one of the early great Confucian scholars and has traditionally been credited with developing the Korean writing system known as *idu*. Together this father-son tandem symbolized the momentous transitions in Korean civilization during their life spans, in particular the unification of the peninsula under Silla rule.

LEGENDS OF THE UNIFICATION

Queen Söndök's reign is often credited with the commencement of the inexorable unification process, which ended in the 670s when Silla, having conquered the other two peninsular states, established a working peace with its main ally-turned-rival in the unification wars, Tang dynasty China. As noted in Chapter 1, until the twentieth-century Korean historical orthodoxy had considered this a legitimate and inevitable step in the historical trajectory of Korean civilization. Queen Söndök stood as a central character

in the unification saga, but the best-known figures were two officials who came of age under her reign, Kim Ch'unch'u and Kim Yusin.

In the 630s, when Queen Söndök ascended to the throne, Silla did not stand in a strong position to emerge as the eventual victor on the peninsula. It was under constant attack from both of its rivals and losing territory, especially to Paekche. As the *History of the Three Kingdoms* recounts, when Kim Ch'unch'u, a nephew of Queen Söndök, lost one of his daughters in a Paekche attack in 641, he turned his grief into a raging pursuit of vengeance. He received Söndök's permission to take a small delegation to Koguryö to ask for its assistance in the struggle against Paekche. The Koguryö monarch demanded in return promises from Silla to return some of Koguryö's former territory that Silla had seized earlier. When Kim rejected this demand, the Koguryö king immediately incarcerated him. Word reached the Silla court, and soon Queen Söndök had a talented military official, Kim Yusin, mobilize 10,000 crack troops to attack Koguryö. Before fighting ensued, this daring move appeared sufficient to earn Kim Ch'unch'u's release, and the legend of the two Kims was born, eventually to climax in their respective roles in the unification wars.

Kim Ch'unch'u would gain fame as the ambitious enabler of Silla's unification. He laid the diplomatic groundwork, through his trips to China as Silla's royal envoy, for the indispensable alliance with the Tang dynasty. For this, he would also be eventually excoriated by some modern historians for setting a precedent of subservience. Later, after being enthroned as King Muyöl in 654, Ch'unch'u cemented this relationship with China, which paid off when, in early 660, the Tang emperor sent 130,000 Chinese troops to the western coast in order to join Silla in its attack on Paekche forces. Paekche would fall that summer in the famous Battle of Hwangsanböl. Ch'unch'u died the following year, and it would be his son, the next Silla king, who would oversee the completion of the unification project under the direction of Kim Yusin.

If Kim Ch'unch'u has faced a mixed reception among modern historians, Kim Yusin has continued to enjoy a positive assessment.

The military hero of the unification wars, Kim Yusin's popular standing has as much to do with the many legendary stories of his exploits as with his historically verifiable accomplishments, which were spectacular to begin with. First, he played a central role, as Kim Ch'unch'u's brother-in-law, in providing the political and military support for Ch'unch'u to ascend to the throne in the first place. He served thereafter as Ch'unch'u's right-hand man in efforts to solidify the alliance with Tang China, consolidate and strengthen monarchical control, and carry out the military campaigns against Paekche. As the leader of Silla's forces, Kim Yusin is credited with defeating and eventually conquering Paekche, and with mapping out the plan to conquer Koguryö. The defeat of Koguryö, again in partnership with the Tang forces, came finally in 668, but not without the threat of Silla itself becoming absorbed by the Chinese ally. When Tang forces remained in Korea to enforce the Chinese emperor's claims to dominion over the peninsula as a whole, Kim Yusin led the resistance in what has come to be known as the Silla-Tang War of the 670s. Kim's eventual success in driving out the Chinese from the peninsula was tempered by the compromise reached for the sake of peace, namely the limitation of Silla's advance into Koguryö's old territory. While modern historians would lament this outcome, Kim Yusin's heroic status remains untainted. In fact it has spawned a modern romanticization of Kim and especially of the troupe of young men that had trained him, the *Hwarang*.

The *Hwarang*, literally the "Flower Youth" Corps, appears to have risen to prominence during the reign of Queen Söndök's father, King Chinp'yöng. The *History of the Three Kingdoms*, which seems to have used as a reference a work called the *Chronicles of the Hwarang* (*Hwarang segi*), includes a few passages that portray the *Hwarang* as a youth group that inculcated the spirit of camaraderie, learning, and service. Kim Yusin was the most famous *Hwarang* graduate, but prominent also were his son, Wönsul, and Kwanch'ang, a brave youth who died in the decisive battle against Paekche in 660. The legendary standing of these three, and the relative absence of *Hwarang* actions in the records after the

seventh century, point again to the appropriation of people, events, and legends for the historical legitimation of the Silla unification. Such an exercise was not limited to the Silla unification, however. Even before, but particularly after, the controversial discovery of a manuscript of *The Chronicles of the Hwarang* in the late 1980s, political and cultural leaders in South Korea pointed to this troupe as a model for traditional values, patriotism, national service, and even the martial arts.

Paekche, the Third Kingdom

The debate about the national legitimacy of Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms is itself based on the notion of the Three Kingdoms being somehow "Korean" because what later became Korea occupied the same geographical territory as the Three Kingdoms. Such a structuring of the past according to what happened later—what historians call the fallacy of *teleology*—overlooks the political as well as nationalistic motivations for devising such narratives of legitimation and primordial national character. Furthermore, this premise tends to downgrade other important elements of ancient history on the peninsula, in particular the "third kingdom" of Paekche. In addition to being a major political and cultural entity, Paekche best reflected the complex, close ties between the peninsular polities and those in the islands to the east that, around the same time as the Silla unification, formed what we now call Japan.

At one time Paekche might have been the most dynamic and powerful of the three kingdoms. It enjoyed the economic advantages of occupying the peninsula's fertile south-central and southwestern regions, which also provided easier access to China for trade and cultural exchange. Although the mythologies of this kingdom date its founding to the first century BCE by migrants from the north, historical records more soundly place its emergence in the fourth century CE. The early



Paekche state, however, was driven from its original position around present-day Seoul further southward, and for the last two centuries of its existence until 660, Paekche territory commanded the southwestern portion of the peninsula. There it developed a sophisticated political and economic system, but achieved its most impressive advances in religion and culture. Indeed Buddhism's paramount position in Paekche civilization appears to have inspired the most outstanding examples of religious artifacts from the ancient era.

Paekche transmitted many of these cultural advances, including technologies in metallurgy and architecture, to the polities that began forming simultaneously across the strait in the Japanese islands. The archaeological and historical evidence, including from ancient Japanese sources, of consistent, active interaction between the archipelago and the states on the peninsula is overwhelming. So strong were the ties between the early Japanese state and Paekche, in particular, that when Paekche battled Silla in the unification wars, aid arrived from the islands, and after Paekche's defeat in 660, many of its rulers fled to Japan. These developments reinforced a connection that likely dated back several centuries. But how close was this connection? Did, for example, Paekche rulers contribute to establishing the Japanese royal line, and if so, to what extent? In 2001 the Japanese emperor himself acknowledged the Paekche contributions to his ancestry, which further complicated the historical claims on both sides. But the larger lesson is that there were no such things as Korea and Japan before the seventh century, and that these two countries began as political constructs rather than as primordial civilizations.

SILLA'S "WINNING" FEATURES

The modern appropriation of the *Hwarang* myths served as a capstone to the centuries-long drive to see something spectacular in Silla's conquest of the other two kingdoms. But it can be argued

that these attempts to incorporate the unification struggle into a grand narrative of national unity did a disservice. In Chapter 1 we noted that this traditional perspective faced a backlash from many modern observers, especially those who considered Koguryŏ to have been a truer representative of ancient Korean civilization. A further historical disservice lay in the fact that the glorification of Silla's unification heroics tended to overshadow other intriguing features of this kingdom. Two overlooked facets of Silla in particular and, by extension, of ancient Korea as a whole, come to mind, both highlighted by their association with Queen Sŏndŏk.

The first theme is the impressive technological and cultural advancement of the ancient societies on the peninsula. We have noted already the Koguryŏ achievements in this regard, and Paekche also demonstrated these advances, particularly in the realms of architecture and metallurgy. Silla, too, reached notable heights, with stunning examples still readily visible today in the "museum without walls," the city of Kyŏngju, Silla's capital. These include enormous and immaculate bronze bells, the pagodas in the showcase Buddhist temple of "Pulguksa," the intricately crafted stone carvings of ancient spirits and legends that grace the numerous tombs and other artifacts, and the extraordinary "Sŏkkuram" Buddhist grotto that achieved perfection in the unity of art and spirituality. Perhaps the most stunning remnant of ancient Kyŏngju is the eight-meter high "Chŏmsŏngdae" astronomical observatory that visitors encounter literally on the side of the road. This observatory's precise date of origin is unclear, but all of the historical accounts about it, beginning with the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, point toward the reign of Queen Sŏndŏk. In addition to the historical records, another feature of this observatory also seems to support this perspective: it is comprised of twenty seven layers of stone, and Queen Sŏndŏk was the twenty-seventh monarch of Silla. Before dismissing this as a coincidence, one has to consider the precision in the construction of this observatory. The twenty seven layers are divided by a square-shaped entrance mid-way up the structure, which takes up three layers. That leaves twelve layers above and below the entrance, in reference to the twelve months of the lunar year. Even the number of stones is roughly 365,

the number of days in the year. Given its role in setting the agricultural calendar, forecasting the weather, and, presumably, predicting natural disasters, astronomy (or astrology) occupied a central place in the economic life of the people and, hence, also in maintaining the aura of legitimacy surrounding ancient monarchs.

Another notable feature of the observatory's construction is its shape (see image 2), which is very different from other astronomical observatories in traditional Korea. While one could easily regard this shape as that of a vase, one could also argue that, because it was built during the reign of Queen Sŏndŏk and may have even stood as an altar to her, the observatory actually is shaped to resemble a female body. Whether this is true or not, the possibility leads us to the other feature of Silla and ancient

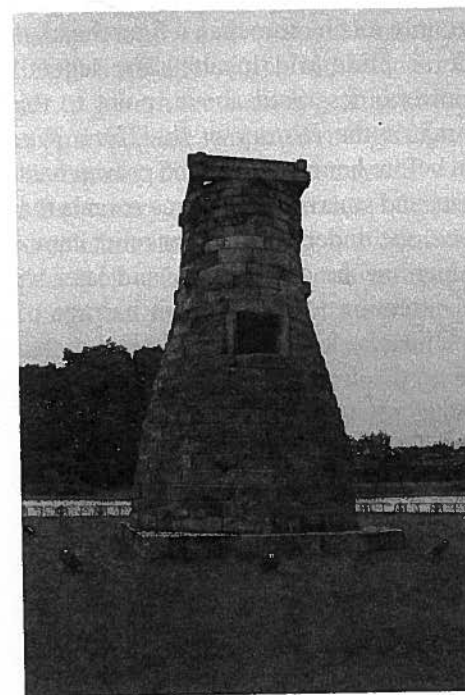


Image 2 The Chŏmsŏngdae Observatory, Kyŏngju, South Korea. (Author's photo.)

Korea evoked by Queen Söndök, and that is the surprisingly high status of females. Textual and archaeological sources point toward practices, such as uxori-localism, or the custom of the husband living in his bride's household, suggesting a relatively high standing of females in the ancient kingdoms. The Koguryö tomb paintings discussed in Chapter 1 also feature prominent females in a way never seen again in later Korean eras. Perhaps the most convincing sign of high female standing, however, are Silla's three female monarchs, starting with Söndök, then with her successor, Chindök, and finally Queen Chinsöng, who reigned in the late ninth century toward the end of the Unified Silla kingdom. A female ruler of Korea would not reappear thereafter.

There remain competing interpretations about the background of Söndök's ascent to the throne, which laid the foundation for the other two female monarchs, but the important point is that Söndök was almost certainly much more than a figurehead, and that indeed she elicited fierce pride and loyalty. The legends surrounding her mystical powers, described above, point to this, but a more convincing source is the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, which notes that, even before her reign, she had proven herself "generous, benevolent, wise, and smart." This source reveals that, upon ascension to the throne, she undertook a major relief campaign on behalf of frail commoners in the countryside, and later she coordinated efforts to find a solution to the constant barrage of attacks from the other two peninsular kingdoms. The most memorable episode came in 643, when she dispatched a diplomatic mission to the Tang emperor of China, only to be ridiculed for being a female monarch in the first place! The Tang emperor, it is recorded, put forth three proposals in response to the Silla ambassador's pleas. First, he would attack Liaodong in order to divert the attention of Koguryö, China's longtime nemesis, and carry out a naval campaign on the western coast of the peninsula to preoccupy Paekche. Second, the Tang emperor would provide thousands of Tang uniforms and Tang army flags in order to help Silla soldiers disguise themselves as fearsome Chinese troops. Finally, the emperor would send a Tang prince to serve as the new monarch of Silla, for Silla, according to the emperor, faced constant siege because its enemies were

emboldened by Silla's female monarch. The unsettling implications of this final proposal could not have escaped the Silla ambassador, who is recorded as having simply but respectfully acknowledged the emperor's proposals. This only invited more scorn from the Tang emperor, who wondered about the fitness of such a man as a diplomatic envoy.

What is equally remarkable about this historical account is that the twelfth-century compiler of the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, Kim Pusik, was a Confucian scholar-official who disdained the idea of a female ruler. In addition to other details suggesting that the Tang emperor's proposals provoked political intrigue among Söndök's opponents in the Silla elite, the *History of the Three Kingdoms'* account of Queen Söndök's reign concludes with commentary that support the Tang emperor's proposal: "According to heavenly principles, the *yang* [male] is hard while the *yin* [female] is soft; and people know that men are to be revered and women are subordinate. So how could Silla have allowed an old maid to leave her inner sanctum in order to govern the country's affairs? Silla allowed her to ascend to become the king, and sure enough chaos ensued. How fortunate that the country did not get destroyed!"

Not only did the country avoid destruction, but it might have been Söndök's accomplishments, including her patronage of science and technology as well as her savvy in cultivating Sillan statecraft, that saved the kingdom in the face of its imminent demise. That this might even have contributed to Silla's ultimate triumph on the peninsula is an irony that seems to have escaped Kim Pusik, himself a descendant of the Silla aristocracy, in his Confucian critique. But these tantalizing signs of Söndök's prowess, however scarce the reliable historical details, have worked in a way that reverses the traditional historical perspective. Today Queen Söndök, like the Silla unification, Kim Yusin, and other venerable relics of ancient Korea, is being reevaluated and freely appropriated by Koreans in reconsidering their identity and heritage. In reimaginings reflected in popular culture, Queen Söndök today often serves as a paragon of female virtue, a great symbol of a time when Korea, unsullied by Chinese and other external influences, stayed true to itself and held (some) women in high esteem.