

KOREAN HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Korea, like Japan, leans heavily on China and Chinese precedent for historical resources. So, one can learn quite a lot about Korea from the Chinese Dynastic Histories. However, the Koreans have produced their own histories, also. National histories, all of which are now lost, began to appear in the early Koguryŏ era. Much of the content of these histories, it is thought, was then included in the two histories listed below in the “first wave.”

Official Histories

There were three “waves” of historiography in pre-modern Korea. The first wave was in the 12th century, the second in the 15th century and the third in the 17th and 18th centuries. The prominent works in each wave are described below.

First Wave:

Samguk sagi 三國史記 (Record of the Three Kingdoms)¹

The first official history of Korea, compiled by the Confucian scholar-official Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1075-1151) and others on the orders of King Injong 仁宗 of Koryŏ and presented to him in 1145. Their work was modeled on the Chinese dynastic history format invented by Sima Qian 司馬遷 in his *Shiji* 史記 (K. *Sagi*). First come three sections of *benji* 本紀 (K. *pon'gi*), chronological annals for each kingdom, Silla, Koguryŏ, and Paekche; then chronological tables, followed by *zhi* 志 (K. *chi*), monographs on such subjects as sacrifices, music, dress, and geography; finally 50 *liezhuan* 列傳 (K. *yŏlchŏn*), biographies of distinguished persons. The compilers used earlier documents which have been lost, presenting the material objectively, but not impartially: there is Confucian bias both in selection and editing. The Chinese transliterations of place-names in *Samguk sagi* are valuable in the study of linguistic history.

Samguk yusa 三國遺事 (Additional Material on the Three Kingdoms)

This work was compiled about 1285 by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn 一然 (original name Kim Kyŏnmyŏng, 1206-1289), who lived through the Khitan and Mongol invasions of Koryŏ. There is one insertion by his disciple, Mugŭk. The history of the text before 1512 is obscure.

Though the title refers to the Three Kingdoms, 95% of the text is a collection of Buddhist legends from Silla. The commonly accepted translation of *yusa* as “memorabilia” (meaning either “important matters” or “keepsakes”) is misleading. *Yusa* 遺事 (C. *yishi*) is a term for unofficial records or remnants added to records already published. The author, who is nowhere explicit about his purpose, knew the official *Samguk sagi*

¹ This information is from *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* by Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt, with additional materials by James Hoare (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1999), p. 400.

(published 140 years earlier) and presumably intended to supplement that official Confucian record with Buddhist material. Two chronological tables are prefixed to the main text. They cover Koguryō, Paekche, Kaya and Silla, concentrating on the royal successions. The relations of these tables to the text is not clear. They may have been added in a second stage of composition.

Some 45% of the main material is headed “Strange Events”; “The Coming of Buddhism,” “Pagodas and States” and “Famous Teachers” make about 35%; and shorter collections on “Exorcisms,” “Graces,” “hermits,” and “Filial Devotion” comprise the remaining 20%. The first fifteen paragraphs of “Strange Events,” mostly taken from other works, some of which are now lost, are not about wonders but briefly identify the people or states known as Ancient Chosŏn, Wiman Chosŏn, Lelang, the Three Han, Puyō, Kaya, Parhae, Paekche, Koguryō and six lesser tribes. Two longer paragraphs contain the myth of King Tongmyōng, founder of Koguryō, and our oldest version of the Tan’gun myth. “The Rise of Buddhism” has one paragraph each for the first missionaries to Koguryō and Paekche, and one of the “Pagodas” was in Koguryō. All the rest is folk material from Silla, including myths of dynastic origins, making a rich store of legends full of the fantastic (and beautiful) imagery of popular Buddhism.

The *Samguk yusa* has been translated by Ha Tae-hung and Grafton K. Mintz as “Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea” (Seoul: Yŏnsei University Press, 1972). Our library has it—call number DS 911 I713.

Second Wave

With the rise of Yangban culture, historiography also made advances. Histories for each Chosŏn king’s reign began to be compiled beginning in 1413 with the *Annals of King T’aejo* 太祖實錄. Eventually there was a complete collection titled *Annals of the Dynasty of Chosŏn* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄). Historians next began compiling official histories of the Koryō era, the *History of Koryō* (*Koryō sa* 高麗史), which was completed in 1451. The *Essentials of Koryō History* (*Koryō sa chōryo* 高麗史節要) was completed in 1452, but had a different structure (see “Organization” below). Finally, in 1485, Korea’s first “complete” history was produced, titled *Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern Kingdom* (*Tongguk t’onggam* 東國通鑑). This work is organized chronologically from Tan’gun 檀君(4th century B.C.) to the end of Koryō (late 14th century A.D.).

Third Wave²

Yi Su-gwang 李睟光 (1563-1628) wrote *Topical Discourses of Chibong* (*Chibong yusŏl* 芝峰類說) in 1614. Yi Ik 李穡 (1681-1763) produced the encyclopedic *Sŏnghŏ sasŏl* 星湖僊說. Other important titles are: An Chŏng-bok’s 安鼎福 (1712-1791) *Annotated Account of Korean History*

² Main source for this information is Ki-baik Lee’s *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

(*Tongsa Kangmok* 東史綱目) and *Comprehensive Record of Successive Reigns* (*Yölcho t'onggi* 列朝統紀); Han Ch'i-yun's 韓致齋 (1765-1814) *History of Korea* (*Haedong yöksa* 海東繹史); and Yi Kung-ik's 李肯翊 (1736-1806) *Narratives of Yöllyösil* (*Yöllyösil kisul* 燃藜室記述).

Increasingly, histories focus on Korean identity and the legitimacy of current and past rulers. That is, even though a historian was not commissioned to write a royal history, that is often what he produced.

Organization

As in Japan, Korean historians have followed a number of organizational tangents. Some histories, such as the *History of Koryö* (*Koryö sa* 高麗史) are organized by type of entry (e.g., annal, treatise, biography, etc.). Others are organized chronologically, such as the *Essentials of Koryö History* (*Koryö sa chöryo* 高麗史節要).