The Relationship between Gaya and Wa Viewed from the Sentence Carved on the Gwanggaeto-wang Stele

BEAK, Seung-Chung

The inscriptions at the monument to King Gwanggaeto provide a useful depiction of the foreign relations of Koguryo during the reign of King Gwanggaeto (391–413). Of particular note among the inscriptions are the detailed descriptions of Koguryo's subjugation of Silla and its recognition of the adversarial relationship between itself and Wa, and the part that Gaya played in this, as well.

Although early Gaya (Pyonhan) and Wa do not appear in official Chinese histories dating from the Western Jin (226–316) to the early fifth century, this is because foreign diplomatic and trade channels were lost due to the decline of the four Han kingdoms. Although in the middle of the fourth century both Gaya and Wa formed a powerful alliance with Paekche, which held Tae-bang region under its control, King Gwanggaeto of Koguryo had intended to break up the alliance between the three and sought in his relations with Wa justification for the 'subjugation of Paekche' and 'southern conquest' to help Silla.

Gaya and Wa both appear in a record for the year 400 in the inscriptions. Points of particular interest in this record are that Imna (Mimana) and Gara were not subjugated but were "returned (帰還)". the "Alla army" was a "garrison mainly consisting of Alla citizens and also some citizens from Wa", and that "Silla castle" was a castle on the periphery of Silla that was near Alla.

Gaya is perceived in the inscriptions as being "captive (奴客)" and though different from the inner homogenous existence with Paekche and Silla, it is different from Wa because it was "returned": Wa is accorded an outer heterogeneous existence that is "lawless" because it broke the law.

Gaya and Wa had living conditions in common mainly in connection with the sea, and there was interaction between the two from an early period. For Wa, in particular, interaction with Gaya, which had iron resources, was an important issue for the formation of the ancient state in terms of the period in which it occurred. The reason for Wa's alliance with Gaya in response to Paekche's request at the time of the southern conquest was because of the need to stabilize Gaya to ensure a continuous supply of iron. This relationship between both countries continued until the fall of Gaya.