

# Exploring the Research Achievements and Challenges of Ancient Tombs in Goguryeo

Ho-Sang Yu<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

Ancient Goguryeo tombs with their unique forms and structures offer profound insights into the cultural landscape and architectural prowess of the Goguryeo civilization. These tombs manifest as underground structures that reflect the contemporary Goguryeo residences and make them indispensable subjects for research due to their architectural and cultural significance. Accordingly, this study aims to undertake a comprehensive examination and utilization of the extant Goguryeo tombs located in China and the northern Korean Peninsula. The analysis incorporates various perspectives on the distribution of these tombs based on previous academic research. It also comments on the challenges and limitations faced in studying Goguryeo structures due to geopolitical restrictions. The paper suggests a need for collaborative research with neighboring countries for a comprehensive understanding of the Goguryeo era.

Keyword : Goguryeo, Tomb culture, Mural tombs, Research achievements, Challenges

## 1. Introduction

The emergence and development of the Goguryeo civilization in northeastern China in 37 B.C. followed by its subsequent relocation to the northern region of the Korean Peninsula and its eventual downfall at the hands of the Silla and Tang allied forces in 668 constitutes a significant epoch in the cultural history of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Spanning approximately 700 years, Goguryeo played a pivotal role in the region to engage in extensive interactions with ancient Chinese states. In particular, Goguryeo's cultural achievements and architectural prowess surpassed those of its contemporaries of Baekje and Silla. Its advanced architectural techniques and distinctive style even influenced the architectural development of these two nations in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula.

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the ancient tombs of Goguryeo in order to reveal that these tombs served not merely as burial grounds but also as subterranean structures mirroring the residential dwellings of the era [1-3]. These tombs bear testimony to the advanced technological

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1 Seoul Museum of Korea Folk Music, Seoul, Korea [Curator]  
e-mail: thehddl123@naver.com

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capabilities of Goguryeo. In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to consolidate existing research on Goguryeo's architectural accomplishments by examining the extant ancient tombs located in China and the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, this paper seeks to evaluate the achievements and limitations of previous research in order to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Goguryeo's advanced technology and architectural legacy.

## **2. Ancient Goguryeo tombs**

### **2.1 Occurrence of ancient Goguryeo tombs**

The ancient Goguryeo tombs are distributed over a vast geographic area spanning from the northeastern regions of China including Liaoning Province and Jilin Province to the north-central part of the Korean Peninsula. However, these tombs exhibit distinct characteristics [4]. Initially, mural tombs were constructed in China influenced by the expanding central regions of the country. However, with the capital of Goguryeo moving to Pyeongyang, mural tombs became predominantly concentrated around the Pyeongyang region and gave rise to a unique ancient tomb culture in Goguryeo that diverged from the central districts of China [5].

The original form of the memorial service preceding burial was the stone mound tomb. Initially, large stones were placed near rivers to serve as platforms for placing the deceased which were then covered with additional stones [4]. This form evolved into a square pyramid style constructed with broken stones at the base of mountains away from riversides. Over time, stone chambers were incorporated into the tombs lightly covered with soil on the exterior. The occurrence of soil mound tombs in Goguryeo is somewhat uncertain. These tombs are typically found in hilly districts with picturesque views facing expansive fields and leaning against mountains. Soil mound tombs often form groups ranging from a minimum of 3 to 4 tombs to as many as 100 tombs. The distribution of soil mound tombs was based on several factors. One of them was the social status of the deceased. The size and complexity of the tombs were often indicative of the social rank of the individual buried within. The larger and more complex the tomb, the higher the person's social status was likely to be. Also, the location of these tombs was often chosen based on feng shui principles. Feng shui, a traditional practice originating from ancient China, uses energy forces to harmonize individuals with their surrounding environment. The Goguryeo people chose the locations of their tombs based on these principles to ensure good fortune for the deceased in the afterlife.

Previous research on the ancient tombs of early Goguryeo has primarily focused on the Amnok River

basin centered around Jipan and the Daedong River basin centered around Pyeongyang. Notably, studies on ancient tombs of early Goguryeo are predominantly concentrated in and around the Daedong River region, particularly Pyeongyang [6].

## **2.2 Structure of ancient Goguryeo tombs**

Ancient Goguryeo tombs can be primarily classified into two types: stone mound tombs and soil mound tombs. Stone mound tombs can be further divided into stone coffin mound tombs and stone chamber mound tombs. Stone coffin mound tombs found in Tonggu within the Jipan region signify the central power of Goguryeo and are distinct from the graves in the northeastern part of China. Stone chamber mound tombs were constructed during a period of institutional adjustments under powerful royal authority. When the capital of Goguryeo was relocated to Pyeongyang, stone chamber soil mound tombs became the main form of memorial service for the ruling classes. Consequently, the ancient tombs of Goguryeo underwent changes in their form alongside the transformations in Goguryeo itself [7].

Soil mound tombs are predominantly located in the Jipan and Pyeongyang regions. They can be further divided into stone chamber soil mound tombs and stone chamber soil mound mural tombs. As illustrated in [Table 1], both stone mound tombs and soil mound tombs exhibit diverse developments in their appearance and inner structure, particularly in the part where the corpse is entombed. The method of entombment shifted from suhyulsik to hoenghyulsik in stone mound tombs. Some stone chamber soil mound tombs feature murals that depict the daily life of the Goguryeo people on the walls and ceilings of the stone chambers.

The burial chambers in the ancient Goguryeo tombs consist of the hyunsil where the corpse is entombed, the junsil where rituals are performed and the yeondo or myodo which connect the interior chambers to the outside space. The number of burial chambers serves as an important basis for understanding the changes and developments in the structure of soil mound tombs. Burial chambers are classified as single chamber tombs or plural chamber tombs depending on whether a junsil is present [5]. The plane of the burial chambers can be categorized as square, rectangular or lateral rectangular. The direction in which the burial chambers face can be classified as facing west, facing southwest or facing south. Depending on the location of the burial chambers, the ancient Goguryeo tombs can be further classified as basement, semi-basement or ground tombs. The technique of ceiling construction is a significant characteristic of the ancient Goguryeo tombs and examples include flat ceilings, prop ceilings, vault ceilings, fold ceilings, mixed ceilings and more.

[Table 1] Goguryeo tomb structure

Material		Number of burial chambers	Technique of ceiling construction	
Stone mound tomb	Stone coffin mound tomb	Single chamber tomb	Flat ceiling	
			Fold ceiling	
			Vault ceiling	
	Stone chamber mound tomb	Plural chamber tomb	Prop ceiling	Octagonal prop ceiling
Triangle prop ceiling				
Parallel prop ceiling				
Soil mound tomb	Stone chamber soil mound tomb	Multi chamber tomb	mixed ceiling	Octagonal+triangle prop
	Stone chamber soil mound mural tomb			Vault+triangle prop
				Vault+parallel prop
				Triangle+parallel prop
				Vault+parallel+triangle prop

### 2.3 Distribution of ancient Goguryeo tombs

Ancient Goguryeo tombs exhibit a distribution pattern encompassing the Jipan region in China centered around the Amnok River as well as Pyeongyang, Pyeongannamdo and Hwanghaedo centered around the Daedong River. The ancient Goguryeo tombs situated in Jipan are located at the foothills that face the Amnok River. In total, there are 24 ancient Goguryeo tombs comprising two stone mound tombs and twenty-two soil mound tombs. The majority of ancient Goguryeo tombs in the vicinity of the Daedong River region are concentrated in close proximity to Pyeongyang. Ancient tomb murals are predominantly distributed in Hwanghaenamdo. A total of fifty-four ancient tombs have been confirmed near Pyeongyang with an additional ten ancient tombs discovered in Hwanghaenamdo [8].

## 3. Studies on ancient tombs of Goguryeo

The mountain fortress and ancient tombs of Goguryeo situated in northeastern China along with the ancient tombs in the Daedong River basin of North Korea was designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites during the 28th general meeting of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in July 2004 which was held in Suzhou, China. This event has sparked a heightened interest in Goguryeo studies within the Korean academic community. Of particular significance is the Northeast Project undertaken by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences which has further contributed to the growing scholarly attention devoted to Goguryeo.

### **3.1 Studies on types and structures of ancient tombs of Goguryeo**

Extensive research has been conducted in the field of archaeology to explore the diverse types and structures of ancient tombs in Goguryeo and resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive chronicle detailing the construction of these tombs. The fields of art history and archaeology have played pivotal roles in advancing our understanding of early Goguryeo tombs and made significant contributions to the body of knowledge in this area.

However, it is worth noting that different perspectives exist regarding the chronological sequencing of ancient Goguryeo tomb construction. In light of this, this paper contends that relying solely on the construction chronicle established by the fields of art history and archaeology may benefit from further refinement. As a suggestion for advancing research in this domain, the paper proposes a new approach that involves examining architectural drawings and the pillars discovered within the ancient Goguryeo tombs which may give new information on the construction chronology and enhance our understanding of these remarkable structures.

Currently, studies focusing on Goguryeo construction during the Goguryeo period, particularly those conducted by South Korea, have been relatively inadequate compared to the extensive research carried out in North Korea. This discrepancy can be attributed to the predominance of Goguryeo remains located in North Korea and the northeastern part of China. Furthermore, the initiation of the Northeast Project by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2002 [9] has imposed significant limitations on Korean scholars, impeded their access to the Goguryeo remains situated in China and exacerbated the challenges associated with studying Goguryeo construction during that period.

Publications such as *Ancient Tomb Mural* by the International Council on Monuments and Sites Korea (ICOMOS-Korea) and the *Research Report on the Preservation of Goguryeo's Mural Tombs* by South Korea and North Korea by the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and the Korean Historian Council have attempted to address the issue. In addition, broadcast media has played a crucial role in illuminating the scattered Goguryeo remains in China with the purpose of navigating the complexities arising from the Northeast Project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. However, it is important to acknowledge that this project that holds national significance for both Korea and China beyond the realm of academic discourse has intensified conflicts between the two countries further hindering the search for a resolution to this intricate matter [10].

Nevertheless, the Northeast Project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has served as a catalyst in generating interest in Goguryeo among Koreans and within the Korean academic community.

The Korean scholarly community is diligently engaged in investigating and elucidating the original culture fostered by Goguryeo through cultural exchanges with China. They are actively pursuing studies to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the Northeast Project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to foster productive resolutions to this complex issue.

### **3.2 Studies on the distribution of ancient tombs of Goguryeo**

Studies on the distribution of ancient tombs in Goguryeo have yielded varying perspectives and arguments among scholars. Different viewpoints regarding the distribution have been presented by researchers as outlined below. In 1997, Yeonghun Ju from North Korea in the Study on the Chronicle of Mural Tombs of Goguryeo asserted that a total of forty-four mural tombs exist with thirteen located in Japan, China and thirty-one in Pyeongyang, Pyeongannamdo and Hwanghaedo in North Korea. In 2004, Suho Son in the Study on Ancient Tombs of Goguryeo proposed the presence of eighty-one mural tombs with twenty-one in Japan, China, one in Hwanin, twenty-three in Pyeongyang, twenty in Nampo, thirteen in Pyeongannamdo and eleven in Hwanghaedo. During the 1980s, Wonryong Kim from South Korea based on findings in North Korea and China argued in Korean Mural Tomb that there are a total of fifty mural tombs with thirteen in Japan, China and thirty-seven in North Korea. The South Korean academic community generally referred to the findings of the North Korean academic community. In 2004, Hotae Jun proposed in the World of Tomb Mural of Goguryeo that there are a total of one hundred and six tomb murals with thirty in Japan, China and seventy-six in North Korea. It indicates a doubling of the number of ancient tombs of Goguryeo. In 2008, Junbok Lee in China in the Study on Tomb Mural of Goguryeo argued for a total of one hundred and fifteen tomb murals with thirty-eight in Japan, China and seventy-seven in North Korea. It is worth noting that the estimation of the number of ancient tombs and tomb murals is anticipated to increase as further archaeological excavations take place. Consequently, it becomes imperative to conduct studies on the yet-to-be-unearthed ancient tombs and tomb murals of Goguryeo while considering the expected growth in their numbers [4].

## **4. Conclusion**

The ancient tombs of Goguryeo hold immense cultural and architectural significance to provide invaluable insights into the Goguryeo civilization's way of life and distinct characteristics. These tombs have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of Goguryeo as they exhibit unique forms and

structures that are less influenced by Chinese cultural norms. The study of ancient Goguryeo tombs has predominantly centered on disciplines such as art history and archaeology with a specific focus on tomb murals. In addition, extensive research has been conducted on the architectural types and structures of these tombs.

Ancient Goguryeo tombs with their unique forms and structures offer profound insights into the cultural landscape and architectural prowess of the Goguryeo civilization. While archaeological and art history research has focused on the types, structures and distribution of these tombs, limitations exist due to geopolitical barriers restricting access to these sites particularly those in China due to the Northeast Project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. To overcome these challenges, fostering cultural exchange and collaboration with neighboring countries is imperative. The paper while consolidating existing research and suggesting further avenues for exploration underscores the need for more comprehensive research on these valuable cultural heritage sites. This would not only deepen our understanding of the Goguryeo civilization but also foster greater appreciation for the enduring architectural legacy of Northeast Asia.

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