Wooden Inscriptions and the Culture of Writing in Sabi Paekche

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ABSTRACT

Surviving inscriptions from the Korean kingdom of Paekche 百濟 (ca. C.E. 250–660) are extremely few in number. Recent archaeological discoveries have uncovered an unprecedented cache of Paekche writing in the form of wooden tablets, known as *mokkan* 木簡, dateable to the period when the kingdom’s capital was at Sabi 泗沘 (C.E. 538–660). This article first looks at the distribution of *mokkan* finds within the Sabi capital and argues that *mokkan* were one material surface utilized in the context of a multi-faceted written culture that included other media such as paper and stone. This article proposes that because wood was a relatively cheap, reusable, and disposable medium, *mokkan* became the material surface of choice for the acquisition of literacy and experimentation with Sinographic script. This meant that *mokkan* were not only a space for learning individual characters (calligraphic practice), but also for practicing composing sentences according to the rules of Sinitic syntax and in established Sinitic literary forms (composition practice). As a result, *mokkan* offer a unique window into the development of literary writing among Paekche elites during the late sixth and early seventh centuries. This article explores four examples of Paekche *mokkan* containing inscriptions that fall into the category of “composition practice,” and argues that these compositions suggest literary form was an increasingly valued component of inscriptive practice in Paekche. KEYWORDS: *mokkan*, inscriptions, writing, literary composition, Paekche, Sabi.

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORY OF WRITING IN THE KOREAN KINGDOM of Paekche 百濟 (ca. C.E. 270–660) is known only in fragments, from secondary materials compiled in later eras and, increasingly, through archaeologically excavated inscriptions.¹ While some writing seems to have been in use in the kingdom during the earliest era of its history, known as the Hansŏng 漢城 period (ca. C.E. 250–475), its scope was limited to ritual and possibly some state record-keeping purposes (Sin 2014). For the following Ungjin 熊川 period (C.E. 475–538), when the capital was located at modern Kongju 公州, at least some in the kingdom were sufficiently adept at written composition, as evidenced by the inscriptions found on two stone steles in the tomb of King Muryŏng (r. 501–523) 武寧王陵. However, sources for this period are also scarce, and the uses of writing were probably similarly limited (Kwŏn 2005; Pak C. 2015a, 2015b; Yi Chaehwan 2015).

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After the move of the capital to Sabi 泗泚 (modern Puyŏ 扶餘) in C.E. 538, the presence of inscriptions in the archaeological record expands considerably. Wooden tablets bearing ink inscriptions, known to scholars as *mokkan* 木簡, have been discovered at sites throughout the former capital as well as at some provincial outposts, including an iron production facility at Pogam-ni 伏岩里 in modern Naju 那州 (Kim S. 2009, 2010; Yi Chaech'öl 2015b; Yi Y. 2013), and the checkpoint at Paengnyŏng Fortress 栢嶺城 in modern Kŭmsan 錦山 (Kang 2009; Yi Chaech'öl 2015a). Despite the still relatively few sites that have yielded *mokkan*, discoveries span the entirety of the Sabi period (C.E. 538–660) and offer a window into the considerable diversity of script usage in this period of Paekche's history. Many of the inscriptions attest to a variety of administrative and record-keeping functions, while a significant number also suggest that script was used as a tool for learning and communication, as well as an outlet for experimentation and play.

In this article, I first outline the scope and character of the written culture of the capital at Sabi, focusing on questions of who was producing what sorts of texts, in what locations, and why. Then, through attention to some specific examples, I argue that within the context of the capital at Sabi during the sixth and seventh centuries, one learned to manipulate written language on *mokkan* and that the disposability and reusability of wood made *mokkan* the primary medium for one's entry and acculturation into the world of script. In this capacity, *mokkan* were certainly important for the refinement of one's calligraphy, but also served as a space in which one might hone one's ability to compose text in different forms. While scholars of *mokkan* have long categorized certain pieces as "writing practice," I propose that this category should be further broken down into "composition practice" and "calligraphic practice."

The examples I present in this article are best characterized as "composition practice." The prevalence of examples of composition practice among the still relatively small number of Paekche *mokkan* suggests that the ability to compose was valued at least as highly as the ability to produce legible inscriptions. As will be seen below, the honing of one's ability to compose could take many forms—from random jottings in metered prose, to Sinitic verse, to something resembling narrative—but in all cases, scribes are seen producing original texts that draw upon established Sinitic literary conventions. These inscriptions show that not only were scribes in Paekche aware of the greater Sinitic literary universe but betray the growth of an increasingly formally aware written culture shared among Sabi's elites.

BACKGROUND

Mokkan are strips of wood carved for use as writing surfaces. Writing on wood has a long history in China, where bamboo was the preferred writing surface prior to the invention of paper during the Han dynasty. While bamboo and wood strips continued to be used alongside paper for some centuries thereafter, they had largely ceased to be in circulation by about the fifth century, supplanted by the increased availability of paper (Tsien [1962] 2004:96–99). In Korea and Japan, however, wood was an important medium for writing in the early stages of the assimilation of script technology (ca. sixth through eighth centuries). Because paper for some time remained a scarce commodity, it made good economic and practical sense to fell locally abundant trees and shape them into surfaces suitable for writing.

As in China, the importance of *mokkan* as writing surfaces is thought to have diminished as paper became increasingly available in the Korean kingdoms and the Japanese archipelago (Yi K. 2013:24; Yun 2007a:71–74).² While paper may not necessarily have been unobtainable, it was a more prestigious material, and its use imbued inscriptions with value (Frydman 2014:175; Lurie 2011:161–162). This is not to say that texts on *mokkan* were automatically devalued: *mokkan* were sturdier than paper and thus could be called upon for specialized tasks (Frydman 2014:175; Lurie 2011:162). However, while there are exceptions, generally it can be understood that *mokkan* operated in more mundane and preliminary contexts, providing support for the production of inscriptions of greater significance.³

The term *mokkan* was coined in Japan, where large numbers of inscribed wooden tablets have been unearthed consistently since 1961.⁴ To date, approximately 380,000 *mokkan* have been recovered archaeologically from sites throughout the archipelago, with large concentrations found in the Yamato region (present-day Nara prefecture), where Japan's early historic capitals were located (Watanabe 2014:11).⁵ These inscribed artifacts have proved a boon to the study of Japan's early history, providing insight into aspects of early transportation networks, taxation systems, bureaucratic structure, folk rituals, educational processes, and poetic practices. *Mokkan* studies has become a full-fledged sub-discipline in the study of Japanese historical documents (Jap. *shiryōgaku* 史料学), and a scholarly society devoted to the study of *mokkan* from the archipelago, formed in 1979, continues to meet and publish a journal on an annual basis. Japanese *mokkan* have also garnered the attention of scholars working outside of Japan (e.g., Farris 1998; Frydman 2014; Lurie 2011).

By contrast, scholars have just begun to tap the potential of Korean *mokkan* for the study of the Three Kingdoms (ca. C.E. 250–668) and Unified Silla (C.E. 668–935) periods, so until recently, very little has been published on Korean *mokkan* in English (Lee 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016). This is at least partly because *mokkan* from sites on the Korean peninsula remain considerably fewer than their Japanese counterparts, with, according to this author's calculations, only about 350 decipherable *mokkan* recovered from the territory of Paekche's peninsular neighbor, Silla 新羅 (ca. C.E. 250–935) and a little less than one hundred from Paekche sites.⁶ *Mokkan* were first discovered on the Korean peninsula in 1975 at Anapchi Pond 雁鴨池 in Kyōngju 慶州, the former Silla capital. While this initial cache of about fifty *mokkan* opened up a new avenue for understanding written life in early historic Korea, research on them remained relatively undeveloped until the use of infrared photography began in the early 2000s (Hong K. 2013:96–98).

The discovery in 1983 of some five *mokkan* from Kwanbung-ni 官北里, a Paekche site in Puyō, went largely unremarked at the time. However, the unearthing of a single *mokkan* from the Kungnamji Pond 宮南池 site in 1995 and then more than 30 from the Nūngsan-ni 陵山里 temple site over the course of several excavations from 1999 through 2002 attracted widespread scholarly interest to Paekche *mokkan* (Hong S. 2013:16). Since the early 2000s, a number of excavations at sites throughout Puyō have continued to yield *mokkan*, usually in small numbers. From the city of Puyō, a total of 80 *mokkan* have been unearthed and deciphered. As a result, a new corpus of written material from Paekche has been made accessible for research.

MOKKAN IN THE SABI CAPITAL

The exact layout of Sabi when it served as Paekche's capital is still poorly understood. According to *Samguk sagi* 三國史記, Sabi seems to have been a candidate for the capital's transfer as early as the reign of King Tongšōng 東城王 (r. 479–501), who went on hunting expeditions there (Best 2006:310; Kim K. 2005:102). An earthen wall (known as Nasōng 羅城) eventually demarcated the northern and eastern boundaries of Sabi; it was either under construction or possibly even complete by the time King Sōng 聖王 (r. 523–554) moved his court there in C.E. 538 (Kim K. 2005:102). It is clear that the location was chosen for strategic defense purposes, since the Kūm River 錦川 marks its western border, while a large marsh extends to the south. Because of the concern with defense, the fortress on the low peak of Mount Puso 扶蘇山 in the north, along with the Kwanbung-ni area at its foot, had long been considered the likely site of the royal palace.

More recent scholarship has placed the palatial complex in the Kwanbung-ni foothills and parts of the adjacent Kua-ri 舊衙里 district, with Mount Puso as a defensive and garden space (Pak S. 2010:264–265). Yi Pyōngho (2013:71) goes a step further in arguing that, based on artifact distribution and the strategic locations of facilities established by the Tang military force that occupied Sabi after Paekche's defeat in 660, the palace may have included the entirety of the Kwanbung-ni, Ssangbung-ni 雙北里, and the northern part of the Kua-ri districts.

Some support for Yi's theory of the palace's location might be found in the distribution of *mokkan* finds in Puyō. To date, no *mokkan* have been recovered from the interior of the fortress at Mount Puso. However, a total of twenty-five *mokkan* have been unearthed from eight different sites in an area to the south and east of Mount Puso known as Ssangbung-ni. Yi Pyōngho (2013) identifies this area as an eastern administrative extension of the palace; the content of the *mokkan* found in this area generally supports this idea. Meanwhile, the Kwanbung-ni site also falls within the area Yi designates as the royal palatial complex (Yi identifies this particular area as the residence of the royal family). Overlaying Yi Pyōngho's theory for the location of the palatial complex onto the distribution of *mokkan* finds in Puyō shows significant overlap (Fig. 1).

Based on Figure 1, five of the eight Ssangbung-ni sites fall within or immediately to the north of what Yi calls the "eastern administrative area" (B). He speculates that this eastern administrative extension was added to the palace after a flood in 612 damaged parts of the original palatial complex.⁷ Indeed, all eight of the sites that yielded *mokkan* in this area seem to date to the early-mid seventh century (Yi P. 2013:117, 127). Yi does not identify the area to the immediate east of Mount Puso Fortress—encompassing the Twitkae, Ssangbung-ni 280-5, and Ssangbung-ni 328-2 sites—as being connected to the palace. However, given the trajectory of the outer fortress wall (i.e., Nasōng), it is certainly possible that these sites were proximate to, if not immediately within, the sway of officialdom.

In addition, other *mokkan* sites not immediately falling within the palace boundary nevertheless seem to have had a royal connection. These include the complex at Kungnamji Pond, at the southern edge of the capital, which was built and presumably used primarily by the royal house, and the temple at Nūngsan-ni, located adjacent a royal cemetery just outside the outer fortress wall, which was founded by and probably remained under the control of the royal family.⁸ This leaves only the

Fig. 1. Mokkan sites in Puyŏ, with dashed lines showing Yi Pyŏngŏ's proposed palatial complex (A), its eastern extension (B), and the temple Chŏngnimſa (C). Mokkan sites are: (1) Kwanbung-ni; (2) Kua-ri 319/Puyŏ Holiness Church; (3) Tongnam-ni 216-17; (4) Kunnamji; (5) Ssangbung-ni 102; (6) Ssangbung-ni 201-4; (7) Ssangbung-ni Hyŏnnaedŭl Site; (8) Ssangbung-ni 173-8/Sabi 119; (9) Ssangbung-ni 184-11; (10) Ssangbung-ni 280-5; (11) Ssangbung-ni 328-2; (12) Ssangbung-ni Twitkae; (13) Nŭngsan-ni Temple.⁹

Tongnam-ni 東南里 216-17 (located near the site of the ruined temple at Tongnam-ni) and Kua-ri 319 (part of a private estate) sites as possibly without direct connection to the palace or the bureaucratic state.

The location of the final deposition of a *mokkan* is not the only factor in understanding its inscription and use-life as an object. However, the distribution of finds within Sabi, with such a large number coming from the Ssangbung-ni administrative complex or from within Yi's proposed palatial boundaries, suggests that overall *mokkan* were used as writing surfaces by officials within the state bureaucracy more than anyone else. However, as will be seen below, the writings of these officials were not always "official" in nature. Furthermore, *mokkan* are also found in limited numbers outside of "official" areas, and so cannot always be assumed to function in an "official" capacity.

TYPES OF MOKKAN FROM SABI

In both Korean and Japanese scholarship, *mokkan* are generally sorted into the standard categories of "Document," "Tag," and "Other." Documents are both records and pieces of official bureaucratic discourse. Tags identify the contents of a shipment and would normally have been attached to the shipment; as a result, they have a typical

TABLE 1. *MOKKAN* CLASSIFICATIONS FOR ALL SITES IN PRESENT-DAY PUYŎ

SITE	DOCUMENTS	TAGS	OTHER	UNKNOWN
Ssangbung-ni 102	0	1	0	1
Ssangbung-ni Hyŏnnaedŭl	1	3	1	2
Ssangbung-ni 280-5	1	1	1	0
Ssangbung-ni 173-8 (Sabi 119)	1	2	0	2
Ssangbung-ni Twitkae	0	0	1	1
Ssangbung-ni 184-11	0	1	0	0
Ssangbung-ni 201-4	2	0	0	0
Ssangbung-ni 328-2	0	2	1	0
Kwanbung-ni	3	2	0	3
Kungnamji Pond	1	0	2	0
Nŭngsan-ni Temple site	3	4	11	17
Tongnam-ni 216-17	0	0	0	1
Kua-ri 319	2	2	1	3
Total (80)	14	18	18	30

rectangular shape modified with v-shaped grooves carved out of the right and left sides at either the top or bottom to facilitate attachment with rope or string. “Other” is a catch-all category for any *mokkan* that are neither Documents nor Tags, but can be assigned a function, such as those used for writing practice, ritual purposes, doodling, or transcribing poetry. Any *mokkan* that cannot be categorized are considered “Unknown.”

Table 1 outlines types of *mokkan* found at sites within modern Puyŏ. The majority of Paekche *mokkan* fail to fit within the standard categories of Document or Tag, and are thus considered either “Other” or “Unknown.” However, some interesting trends can be observed within specific sites and among the sites that make up the Ssangbung-ni site group. Of the twenty-five artifacts recovered from the eight Ssangbung-ni sites, five can be conclusively classified as Documents, while ten are Tag *mokkan*. Of the remaining ten *mokkan*, two appear to be examples of writing practice, one is a central rod for a scroll, one is a study aide featuring multiplication tables, and six are of an unknown nature. While five may seem like a small number for “official” Documents, only 14 out of the 80 total *mokkan* from Puyŏ can be put conclusively into this category (Table 1). Meanwhile, those that can be classified as Tags are also few—18 out of 80 total *mokkan*—and 10 of these are from sites in the Ssangbung-ni group.

Based on the data in Table 1, those *mokkan* from the Ssangbung-ni site group classified as either Documents or Tags make up 60 percent of all *mokkan* from these sites, while only 24 percent fall into the “Unknown” category. Meanwhile, for Puyŏ as a whole, only 40 percent can be conclusively classified as Document or Tag, while 37.5 percent of *mokkan* are classified as Unknown. For non-Ssangbung-ni sites only, the percentage of combined Documents and Tags goes down to roughly 30 percent, while Unknowns climb to 44 percent.

These figures might be partly explained through an understanding of how Paekche’s written culture may have been divided among media. While there are many possible reasons for the significantly fewer numbers of *mokkan* found in Korea

compared to Japan, poor preservation and possibly different waste management strategies cannot account entirely for the gap. *Mokkan* do not seem to have ever been mass-produced in either Paekche or Silla in the same way that they were in eighth century Japan. Yi Kyöngsöp (2013:20–21) notes that each Korean *mokkan* seems to have been an individual piece, with minimal effort expended on manufacture. Further, it appears unlikely that several *mokkan* would ever have been tied together for the purpose of inscribing longer texts; rather, multi-surfaced *mokkan* (Kor. *tagangmyöŋ mokkan* 多角面 木簡, referred to as *gu* 觚 in Chinese contexts) were used when more space was needed (Yi K. 2013:21–24; Yun 2007a:73).

Given Paekche's close relationship with the Liang court during much of the sixth century, and sustained relationships with the Sui and Tang thereafter, it is possible that paper was not as scarce there as it might have been in Japan's early historic capitals. It is also possible that paper was being manufactured in Paekche. Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence for the availability of paper in the Sabi capital, but based on the relative paucity of surviving *mokkan*, and the relatively low numbers of "official" Document *mokkan* compared to those of a more inscrutable nature, it seems probable that paper served as a more prominent surface for inscription in Paekche, while the role of *mokkan* was relatively restricted.

The high prevalence of *mokkan* used for writing practice suggests that the role of *mokkan* as a material surface for writing in Paekche was somewhat specific. Among the 80 *mokkan* from Puyö, 14 are classified as "writing practice," constituting 17.5 percent of total *mokkan* (equivalent in number to Document *mokkan*). In fact, given that what appear to be Document *mokkan* may also contain some "writing practice," as in the example of the Chiyaga Meal Rice Record *mokkan* discussed below, many of those pieces that have been identified as Documents might be better classified as "document drafts." While it may not always be possible to distinguish a draft from a final version of a document, there are some strikingly draft-like qualities in the examples described below. I argue these qualities are substantial enough to re-categorize these *mokkan* as "composition practice." Although it is not impossible that some drafts would have been composed on paper, I aim to show that one of the fundamental roles of *mokkan* in the written culture of Sabi was as a surface for drafting.

MOKKAN AS SURFACES FOR COMPOSITION

Writing on *mokkan* was necessarily ephemeral. Whatever was important would be presumably copied onto paper, while what was not important could be simply discarded either by scraping the text off the surface so the wood could be reused or discarding the entire piece. In this regard, *mokkan* mirror the wax tablets of Europe's Middle Ages. The very ease with which inscriptions could be erased from wax made wax tablets an ideal surfaces for "poetic invention and composition" and the jotting down of "ideas and fragments of texts filed away in memory" (Chartier 2007:4–5, 24). I here examine four examples of *mokkan* inscriptions that I think exhibit the productive possibilities inherent in a disposable writing surface.

Note that I do not see legibility as a significant issue for interpreting the examples presented here, although there are other Paekche *mokkan* for which it is a more prominent problem. While there are some issues with legibility for the specific *mokkan* discussed in this article, infrared photography has allowed for fairly definitive readings to be produced for all four of them. Where disagreements or uncertainties remain, a

character is rendered as □. Other symbols used in the following transcriptions include: ○ = blank space; // = transition from one large column to two columns of writing; / = transition between two columns of writing of the same size; and 【】 = text in reverse orientation to that written on other sides.¹⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I have transcribed the modern Sino-Korean pronunciations of characters in standard McCune Reischauer Romanization.¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English and interpretations of the textual content of *mokkan* are my own, presented with acknowledgement that there may be a range of other possibilities.

Nūngsan-ni Temple Site Mokkan No. 8-1, the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record” 支藥兒食米記

Mokkan No. 8-1 from the Nūngsan-ni temple site is an example of a “writing rod” (Ch. *gu* 觚) or a “multi-surfaced *mokkan*” (Kor. *tagangmyōn mokkan*) (Fig. 2). “Multi-surfaced *mokkan*” are often touted as unique to peninsular *mokkan* culture, being almost unknown in Japanese contexts (Yi K. 2013:21–24; Yun 2007a:71–74). There are precedents in Chinese contexts, however. During the Han dynasty, *gu* were used as surfaces for the copying out of texts by students, as well as for the transmission of official state documents in a durable form (Yun 2007a:70–71). Yun Sōnt’ae (2007a) argues that the peninsula’s contact with Chinese *mokkan* culture beginning in the Han Commanderies period (108 B.C.E.–C.E. 313) accounts for their unique prevalence in sixth century Paekche and Silla contexts. However, it should be noted that the “peak” in the use of multi-surfaced *mokkan* on the peninsula comes long after their prominence during the Han dynasty (Yun 2007a:73). Of the 17 multi-surfaced *mokkan* found at Sabi capital sites, 14 are from the Nūngsan-ni temple site, and are therefore dated to sometime in the mid-late sixth century; the other three are datable to the early seventh century. The Chiyaga Meal Rice Record *mokkan*, found during the eighth stage of excavations at the Nūngsan-ni temple site in 2002, is one of the sixth-century examples. It is the longest Paekche *mokkan* recovered to date, measuring 440 mm × 20 mm × 20 mm.

The *Han’guk mokkan chajōn* [Character Dictionary of Korean *mokkan*] deciphers the inscription as follows (modified from Munhwajaech’ōng and Kungnip 2011:262):

Side 1: 支藥兒食米記 初日食米四斗○二日食米四斗小升一○三日食米四斗

Side 2: 五日食米三斗大升 六 日食三斗大二 七日食三斗大升二 八日食米四斗大

Side 3: 食道使家□□次如逢//使豬 / 小治//耳其身者如黑也□道使後後彈耶方//牟氏 / 牟役// 役耶

Side 4: 【又十二石□又一二石□又十四石□十二石□又石又○二石□又二石】

Side 1: Chiyaga Meal Rice Record. First day, meal rice four *mal*; second day, meal rice four *mal* one small *toe*¹²; third day, meal rice four *mal*¹³

Side 2: Fifth day, meal rice three *mal* one large *toe*; sixth day, meal three *mal* two large, seventh day, meal three *mal* two large *toe*, eighth day meal rice four *mal* large

Side 3: Meal *tosa*’s house¹⁴ □ *ch’a*, Yōbong, the Sori Chōi, all of their bodies are as if black. After the *tosa* of rear T’anya-bang, Mo Ssi, Mo Tae, Taeya¹⁵

Side 4: Another twelve *sōm*, another one two *sōm*, another fourteen *sōm*, twelve *sōm*, another *sōm* another, two *sōm*, another two *sōm*

While it is unclear just who or what ‘*chiyaga* 支藥兒’ refers to, at least the first two sides of this *mokkan* can be readily understood as an account register, likely recording

Fig. 2. Nūngsan-ni Temple Site Mokkan No. 8-1, “[Chi-yaga] Meal Rice Record 支藥兒食米記”: Side 1 (far left); Side 2 (middle left); Side 3 (middle right); Side 4 (far right). (Courtesy of Buyeo National Museum.)

the provision of “meal rice” either to or by that entity.¹⁶ This *mokkan* was recovered from a natural waste water channel in the northwestern part of the site that was not in use until after construction of the temple began in 567 (Yi Chaehwan 2014:160; Yi P. 2008:71). Its deposit sometime after the temple was inaugurated suggests that the *mokkan* is somehow connected to the operation of the temple or checkpoint facilities located nearby.¹⁷ Unfortunately, little else can be discerned as to the nature of ‘chiyaga

Fig. 3. Close-up infrared photos of Side 3 of Nūngsan-ni Temple Site Mokkan No. 8-1, segmented into four sections. (Courtesy of Buyeo National Museum.)

支藥兒’ from the archaeological or material record. Nevertheless, the text on the first two sides of this *mokkan* is easily digested without a clear identification of this entity.

The nature of the text on the third and fourth sides is less clear, however. There is an abrupt change in the format of the text on the third side, which seems to have been written in a different hand, with a thinner tipped brush and darker ink than the other three sides (Fig. 3). While the fourth side seems to feature simple writing practice with its repetition of numerals and the unit 石 (*sōm*), the third side cannot be immediately identified as a calligraphic exercise or in association with the text on sides 1 and 2.

Some scholars have tried to somehow connect the enigmatic text on the third side with the inscriptions on the first two sides (e.g., [Son 2010](#)).¹⁸ However, most

acknowledge that there seems to be something of a break between the main text of the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record” (sides 1–2) and the text on the remaining two sides (cf. Kondō 2008; Yun 2007a, 2007b).¹⁹ Yi Pyŏnggho (2008) offers what would appear to be the simplest explanation for the disconnect: Side 3 was partially erased. Yi (2008) observes that the first character on the third side, ‘sik 食’ [eat; meal], seems to be in a lighter shade of ink and is spaced at a distance and to the upper right of the next character, ‘to 道’ (Fig. 3, far left, first character from top). On this basis, Yi argues that this ‘sik 食’ is in fact an incompletely erased trace of a previous inscription. Yi further suggests that the two characters identified as the sequence ‘soch’i 小治’, which appear alongside the sequence ‘sajō 使猪’, also appear to be traces of a previously erased text (Fig. 3, middle left, second and third characters from top, left side). In this case, the style of ‘so 小’ resembles the ‘so 小’ seen in the sequence ‘sosŭng 小升’ on the first face. This all suggests that the third face of the *mokkan* had been a continuation of the account register found on the first two surfaces, but the original text was scraped off, albeit incompletely, to allow for a new inscription (Yi P. 2008:78–79).

The new inscription on Side 3 confounds standard classifications in that it features grammatically complete sentences, a relative rarity for *mokkan*. The spatial parameters of most *mokkan* called for brevity and therefore their inscriptions usually contain only essential information, mostly nouns (as seen on sides 1 and 2 of this *mokkan*). Yi Pyŏnggho (2008:82–83) suggests that the same person inscribed all three sides, with the first two sides offering an objective account of provisions meant for consumption by others, while the third side is a subjective self-memo intended to help the scribe recall identifying characteristics of certain individuals of the rank *tosa* 道使. Some similarities in calligraphic style between Side 3 and Sides 1 and 2 may indicate that the inscriptions are by the same person. However, given that Yi argues this *mokkan* shows signs of erasure and re-inscription, it is equally possible to imagine the third side as the work of a separate individual. Furthermore, if the content of the third side is nothing more than a few notes about the physical appearance of certain *tosa*, meant to facilitate the scribe’s own recall of said individuals, why does it feature complete sentences?

The recovery of wood shavings (Kor. *pusŭrŏgi*) from the Nŭngsan-ni temple site shows that erasure and reuse of *mokkan* was indeed occurring in Paekche; further, the reuse of parts of *mokkan* that had formerly functioned as Documents or Tags for calligraphic practice was not uncommon. The fourth side of this *mokkan* is one such example. The repetition of numerals and the ‘石’ (*sŏm*) character, the omission of important practical information such as dates (which figure prominently on sides 1 and 2, the main text of the record), and the fact that the inscription is written upside-down when compared to the other three sides are all features marking this side as calligraphic practice. Because there is no clear evidence of erasure on this side, it may be that the remaining unused space on the fourth side of the *mokkan* was adopted for the purpose of this writing exercise. However, Side 3 of the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record” *mokkan* shows that parts of a *mokkan* might also be reused for “jotting,” or what I argue is more aptly referred to as “composition practice.”

Yi Pyŏnggho (2008:82–83) argues that this third side exhibits a subjective point-of-view inflected with the scribe’s own self-awareness. He sees this self-awareness in the act of taking down a “self memo,” as essentially opening up a dialogue between self in present and self in future. The idea that the text of Side 3 is a “memo” of sorts does not preclude its identification as “composition practice.” While our scribe may have

indeed been interested in storing information about certain *tosa* for later recall, a close examination of the inscription suggests he was also clearly attentive to the form in which he did so. The text on this face can be broken down into several smaller segments. As noted above, Yi Pyŏnggho (2008) has argued that this *mokkan* shows signs of erasure and reuse. Yi does not mention in this context the two graphs that come between the first ‘*tosa* 道使’ and the character ‘*ch’a* 次,’ which the *Han’guk mokkan chajŏn* identifies as ‘*ka* 家口’ (Fig. 3, far left, fourth and fifth characters from top). Like the other characters that seem to have been “erased,” these characters are in a considerably lighter shade of ink and are partially obscured by a natural feature of the wood that may have hindered erasure or re-inscription. Given that the inscription on this side was in all likelihood for the scribe’s eyes only, it is possible that these were simply left as-is from this face’s previous use. In addition, *tosa* 道使 as written at the top (Fig. 3, far left, second and third characters from top) looks to be in a considerably less practiced hand than when it appears again below (Fig. 3, middle right, fourth and fifth characters from top); while they were probably written by the same person, the shade of the ink and the thickness of the brush strokes suggest they were perhaps written at different times, with different implements, and with differing degrees of precision. We might accordingly set aside the first five characters in the inscription on Side 3 as either pieces of a previous inscription or as isolated moments of calligraphic practice.

It is then possible to begin with ‘*ch’a* 次’ (Fig. 3, far left, sixth character from top), whose placement after the laceration in the wood and inscription in a deeper shade of ink suggests the beginning of a new inscription. While ‘*ch’a* 次’ has normally been interpreted as part of a person’s name (as are the following ‘*yŏbong* 如逢’ and ‘*chŏi* 猪耳,’ with ‘*sori* 小吏’ being understood as a title), it is also possible to understand its function as an adverb beginning a new sentence.²⁰ This allows for the parsing of the following twelve characters of the text into two six-character segments, each ending with a sentence final particle: ‘*i* 耳’ (Fig. 3, middle left, fourth character from top) and ‘*ya* 也’ (Fig. 3, middle right, third character from top). While these are by no means a poetic parallel couplet, they do show that our scribe was tuning his content to fit a particular form: “次如逢使猪耳 其身者如黑也 [Thereupon it was just as if meeting a boar messenger. His body was as if black].”

As noted above, the text that comes before ‘*ch’a* 次’ seems to be the product of a separate inscriptive moment, while what follows ‘*ya* 也’ is yet another blank space, almost the length of a full character, before the second ‘*tosa* 道使’ appears. Visually, these two sentences are set off as a pair. Even the space between them is mediated by the final stroke of the character ‘*i* 耳,’ which dangles almost to the top of ‘*ki* 其’ (Fig. 3, middle left, fourth and fifth characters from top). These two sentences are also written in characters slightly narrower than those found toward the bottom of the *mokkan*, which fill the width of the surface. All of this would seem to mark these two sentences as a separate and distinct inscription from the remaining text on this face.

Without any further context, these isolated sentences read as nonsense. Their nonsensical quality might be construed as another indication that this was composition practice; while the scribe has devoted considerable attention to form, his content seems relatively inconsequential, bordering on playful. This inscription appears to be a work in progress, inscribed on a surface that had once featured a relatively mundane record, and which might have later featured some other sort of text, should another moment have called for this particular inscription’s erasure.

The inscription on this *mokkan* has survived to be studied by scholars in the present entirely by accident. Its current status as a piece of cultural history does not mean we should disregard the possibility that it represents a moment of “drafting” or preliminary composition. This interpretation of the purpose of the text becomes all the more likely as we continue down the third face, where the text that follows the twelve characters just described returns to simple calligraphic practice of place and personal names (Fig. 3, beginning with fourth character from top of middle right, ending bottom far right). The act of turning briefly to experiment with sentence form, for the purpose of both practice and entertainment, is perhaps a natural outgrowth of a material environment (the wood surface) that encouraged the pursuit of refinement in calligraphic form.

Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 305, “Song of Karmic Bonds from a Previous Life” 宿世歌

At Nūngsan-ni, a temple adjacent a royal cemetery stood immediately outside what was presumably the eastern gate of the city, where officials would have closely monitored traffic going in and out of the royal capital. At this site, people composed a variety of texts, including records of meal provisions such as the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record” *mokkan*, ritual texts for the performance of road-side rites (Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 295), and instructions for the performance of official duties (Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 301) (Kungnip and Kungnip 2009). There is no shortage of examples of calligraphic practice on *mokkan* from this site, and, as in the case of Side 3 of the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record” *mokkan*, calligraphic exercises might have provoked composition practice.

In addition to such efforts, full drafts of works of poetry and prose can also be found among the corpus of Paekche *mokkan*, which suggest that scribes were operating within a larger written culture that valued formal sophistication as well as calligraphic mastery. One of the earliest examples of such “drafts” is the inscription on the two-sided Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 305, known as the “Song of Karmic Bonds from a Previous Life” (modified from Munhwajaech’ōng and Kungnip 2011:260) (Fig. 4):

Side 1: 宿世結業同生一處是 / 非相問上拜白來

Side 2: 慧暈○師□ (藏?)

Side 1:

宿世結業 In a previous life, our karma became intertwined

同生一處 And in this life, we are once again together—

是非相問 So let us ask each other what is right and wrong

上拜白來 Bowing before you, I come to humbly plead.²¹

Side 2: Hyehun [of] master’s repository

Kim Yōnguk (2003:140–144) was the first to argue that the text on this *mokkan* could be segmented into a verse consisting of four four-character lines. Since then, it has been generally accepted by scholars that this inscription is a work of “Paekche poetry,” although there is some disagreement over interpretation (cf. Cho H. 2006; Kim Yōngsim 2009; Yi S. 2008). Because of the paucity of surviving material from Paekche, literary historians have been eager to ascribe this verse “canonical” status as a work of Paekche literature (Cho T. 2005, vol. 1:133–134).

While the text on this *mokkan* is certainly remarkable, the push to canonization elides sufficient consideration of the material context. The text was composed on a

Fig. 4. Nüngsan-ni Temple Site
Mokkan No. 305: Side 1 (left);
Side 2 (right). (Courtesy of Buyeo
National Museum.)

mokkan, and as such shares material form with a number of preliminary texts, including raw records to be later compiled in final form, calligraphic or composition practice, and drafts of documents. Even if this was its final form, and assuming it circulated beyond its composer, the fact that this verse was inscribed on a *mokkan* likely communicated something of its relative importance to those who came in contact with it. Furthermore, this *mokkan* features the name of a Buddhist priest, was found at the site of a prominent temple, and its inscription features Buddhist-inflected terms such as ‘*sukse* 宿世’ [“previous life”], ‘*kyöröp* 結業’ [“intertwined karma”], and ‘*tongsaeng ilch’ö* 同生一處’ [“this life, same place”]. The solemn humility expressed in the fourth line suggests an exchange between someone of lower rank with someone of higher status, and therefore a specific social interaction. The language of this line would not be out of place in an official request document, and despite the verse form of its inscription, this *mokkan* may have functioned as a document exchanged

within the temple hierarchy, a material index of the forging of an important social bond.

None of these factors make this verse any less literary, but they do necessitate reflection on its ability to accurately represent “Paekche literature.” The syntax appears to be more or less standard Sinitic, with the possible exception of the fourth line. While [Kim Yŏnguk \(2003\)](#) argues it is composed in Paekche *idu* 吏讀, [Cho Haesuk \(2006\)](#)’s interpretation of it as a Paekche verse “translated” into Sinitic is probably more accurate.²² Translation would surely have been one fundamental component of the production of any sort of inscription in this period. Taking the additional step of fitting a translated text into a pre-existing Sinitic literary form (four-character verse) suggests an awareness of the process of composition beyond mere mechanics. The calligraphy on this *mokkan* is generally neat and there seem to be about half-character-sized spaces left open between each four-character “line,” emphasizing the intentional nature of the metered form of the inscription and suggesting a desire for an appealing presentation. However, the arrangement of characters is not especially precise, with nine in the right column and seven in the left. The sizes of the characters in the left column vary considerably from top to bottom, with the final character seemingly written without as much concern for legibility. In addition, possibly due to natural features in the wood, there is an especially large gap left open between the final two characters, ‘*paek* 白’ and ‘*rae* 來.’ While these imperfections do not necessarily mean the object itself was not exchanged, it could suggest this was a draft.

Another peculiar feature of this *mokkan* is its shape: it is a short, relatively wide rectangular shape with remarkable thickness, measuring 128 mm × 31 mm × 12 mm. The only similar example found thus far is an eighth century Silla *mokkan*—Anapchi Mokkan No. 206, excavated from Anapchi Pond in Kyŏngju—which also features what appears to be metered text ([Fig. 5](#)). This piece measures 145 mm × 42 mm × 10 mm, and includes two columns of six and five characters, respectively, on front and back. While the first column on the first side starts out in a relatively neat and even regular script, the second column seems squeezed in as an afterthought. On the back, the calligraphy begins to look more like cursive or “grass” script. While these are only two examples, a comparison of these physically similar *mokkan*, both featuring metered text, suggests that a certain type of *mokkan* may have been utilized for the drafting of verse. Outside of these two, no other similarly shaped *mokkan* have yet been identified, however. Based on the manner in which the style and spacing of the text deteriorate toward the end of the inscription in both examples, it nevertheless seems likely that both inscriptions are drafts. Initial drafting was likely an important step in composing poetry; that such drafting may have occurred on a disposable surface such as a *mokkan* is an important possibility to consider.

Among early historic Japanese *mokkan* are a sub-category of approximately forty pieces known as *uta mokkan* 歌木簡 or “poetry mokkan;” these contain verses or fragments of verse in the vernacular. None of these bear particular resemblance to Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 305 or Anapchi Mokkan No. 206. Moreover, they seem to have largely been used in performative or ritual contexts or are examples of calligraphic practice ([Frydman 2014](#); [Sakaehara 2011](#)). While it is possible that the Paekche and Silla examples cited here may have functioned in performative or ritual contexts, this would probably have taken a quite different shape from the hypothesized use of *uta mokkan*. Unlike Japanese *uta mokkan*, which [Sakaehara Towao \(2011\)](#) hypothesizes to have been about three times the length (around 360 mm, or two *shaku* 尺) and contain

Fig. 5. Anapchi Pond Mokkan No. 206. (Courtesy of Gyeongju National Museum.)

text largely composed in phonograms, these two *mokkan* are quite compact and written in nearly pure Sinitic (or possibly a form of semantogram-centric transcription of the vernacular, per [Kim Yŏnguk 2003](#)). These features make it hard to imagine they could have been of much use to an oral performer of verse.

The composition on Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 305, dubbed “Song of Karmic Bonds from a Previous Life” (*Suksega* 宿世歌), is likely either a piece of correspondence or a draft of a verse, but was probably not circulated as “literature” on a *mokkan* or used as an aid in oral performance. While there seems to have been some effort expended on presentation in terms of both literary and calligraphic form, other features of the inscription also suggest this was not the final incarnation of this particular inscription. Its language is certainly more poetic than the “nonsense” sentences of Side 3 of the “Chiyaga Meal Rice Record,” but given the way in which the verse positions its speaker vis-à-vis its addressee, it seems probable that a more polished version was later produced, possibly on a different material, to be offered to the intended recipient. Nevertheless, this *mokkan* is another example of an inscription from the Nūngsan-ni site where content has been molded to fit an existing literary form.

Fig. 6. Kua-ri Mokkan No. 47: Side 1 (left); Side 2 (right). (Courtesy of Buyeo National Museum.)

Kua-ri Mokkan No. 47

Most of the *mokkan* unearthed at the Nūngsan-ni temple site date to the late sixth century. While excavations have not yet uncovered any contemporaneous examples from within the city walls, early and mid seventh century sites in the Ssangbung-ni and Kua-ri districts have yielded a number of *mokkan* that show similar trends in attention to literary form. Kua-ri Mokkan No. 47, recovered from the Puyŏ Central Holiness Church site in the Kua-ri district of present-day downtown Puyŏ, contains a trace of epistolary culture (Fig. 6). Although it appears to be a complete composition, it seems no more likely that this would have been its final form than the verse inscribed on Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 305.

The inscription on the *mokkan* reads as follows (Sim and Kim 2015:54):

Side 1: 所遣信來以敬辱之於此貧薄

Side 2: 一无所有不得仕也//莫瞋好邪荷陰之後 / 永日不忘

Side 1: The letter you sent came, and I felt both veneration and shame [upon reading it].
[That you should send it to me] even though I am poor and insignificant.

Side 2: with not one thing to my name, and having been unable to attain rank. – I shall no longer be enraged by matters of good and bad: now, after all the blessings you have granted me, for all my days I will be unable to forget.

This inscription is strikingly legible and written in an obviously practiced hand. Furthermore, our scribe writes in four-character lines that show considerable familiarity with epistolary convention and commands sophisticated expressions such as ‘*kyōngyok* 敬辱’ (“veneration and shame”), ‘*pinbak* 貧薄’ (“poor and insignificant”), and ‘*haūm* 荷陰’ (“time of blessings”) (Sim and Kim 2015:58–59). Moreover, after meeting all the requirements of epistolary discourse, the scribe appends a three-line addendum that focuses on his personal feelings of gratitude toward the addressee. Whether this portion is written in smaller characters intentionally or because the scribe ran out of space, it shifts focus to the writer’s feelings in a way that distinguishes these three lines from the first five, such that the smaller text produces an echo-like post-script.

This *mokkan* was found in an area designated Feature #5, an oblong marsh-like feature about eleven meters long by four meters wide, at least part of which may have been an outhouse (the eggs of human parasites have been found within the feature) (Sim et al. 2012:51). While the *mokkan* was found mostly intact, its discovery in this particular feature strongly suggests it was intentionally disposed. Furthermore, Sim Sangyuk and Kim Yōngmun (2015) note that the content shows none of the information that would be normally appended to the beginning or end of a letter, such as the date and names and titles of the sender and recipient. It does include an initial greeting, but few other of the formal elements of a letter are present. In other words, the *mokkan* contains only the main text of the letter. While Sim and Kim (2015) admit that this seems strange, they still assume the *mokkan* itself was exchanged as a letter. What they do not seem to consider is that this *mokkan* contains only those portions of a letter that might need to have been drafted in advance. The sender needed to spend some time crafting his sentences, and he did so on a *mokkan*.

The Kua-ri site is located near the center of the Sabi capital, just outside the area that Yi Pyōnggho (2013) argues was the location of the palatial complex. The features uncovered at the site are largely related to water management, which has led to the theory that this was the site of the garden of a private estate (Sim et al. 2011:121). If so, the resident, living in close proximity to the palatial complex, was almost certainly a high-ranking official. However, it is not clear who composed the text on the *mokkan* or if it was originally composed anywhere near where it was deposited. Nevertheless, its presence here suggests that the reach of the script in which it was written extended beyond the immediate boundaries of the bureaucracy. Further, its content suggests that written composition had become an important aspect of elite social interaction and that concern with proper literary form had become a crucial element of decorum. As a result, it is possible that drafting one’s correspondence ahead of time on a disposable surface such as a *mokkan* was common practice.

Kunnamji Mokkan No. II-2

Verses and letters were not the only compositions being drafted on *mokkan* in Sabi. Kunnamji Mokkan No. II-2 features an inscription that shares many of the draft-like features seen on Nūngsan-ni Temple Site Mokkan No. 305 and Kua-ri Mokkan No. 47, while echoing some of the more “playful” qualities of Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 8-1. Its inscription has been deciphered by Ki Kyōngnyang (2014:136) as follows (Fig. 7)²³:

Side 1: □君前軍曰今□[敵?]白惰之心□□[之?]□

Side 2: 死所可依故背□作弓彀□[日?]間□[落?]

Side 1: □ lord before, Kun said, now (enemies?) have revealed their ignorant hearts, . . .

Side 2: Death is what can be depended upon. Thereupon, turning his back . . . made a bow and drew it, the (sun?) at that time (set?) . . .

This *mokkan* emerged largely intact from an irrigation channel excavated on the northwest side of Kungnamji pond. Upon discovery, this *mokkan* was originally classified as a wooden object because no ink was visible to the naked eye; however, during the conservation process, an inscription was revealed and subsequently deciphered (Ki Kyŏngnyang 2014:135; Kim C. 2001:428). Initially, it was widely thought that the inscription must be based on a classical text of some sort, but no such text could be identified. Furthermore, the *mokkan* was deliberately split at the top, probably as part of a deposition process. Kim Chaehong (2001:429, 431–432) argues that the intent to destroy the *mokkan* probably indicates it is not a mere transcription of

Fig. 7. Infrared photo of Kungnamji Mokkan No. II-2:
Side 2 (left); Side 1 (right). (Courtesy of Buyeo National Museum.)

an extant work. [Ki Kyŏngnyang \(2014:143\)](#) outlines an alternative interpretation of the text, arguing that it recounts the meritorious actions of a military leader, so perhaps was part of an evaluative process whereby rewards were granted for esteemed service.

While Ki's understanding has some appeal, the idea that this is an official document of some kind finds little support, as it fails to mention any specific dates or personages. While the first character is illegible and may be the name of the '*kun* 君' ("lord"), it is unlikely—with the possible exception of a well-known personage or a member of the royal family—that an individual would be identified by surname only. Meanwhile, the character '軍' (romanized as 'Kun' in the above translation) does appear to be a name, but again it is a single character, and so barring some additional narrative context that could have been provided elsewhere (perhaps on another *mokkan*), it would not appear to refer to a historical individual. Even if this *mokkan* did fulfill the sort of function that Ki suggests, it goes beyond what would have been necessary for such a task in narrating a vivid scene complete with dialogue.

The brush strokes here are thick and uneven, while the spacing of each character is relatively consistent and careful, with a few exceptions. While fourteen characters fill the space on the front, only thirteen occupy the back. For the most part the characters fill the width of the *mokkan*, with the exception of '*il* 日' on the second side, which appears to have been deliberately written narrowly, perhaps in order to distinguish it from '*wal* 曰' on the front. While [Kim Chaehong \(2001\)](#) doubts whether there is a connection between the two sides, it would seem that narratively they do somewhat fit together, and the calligraphic style is consistent between them.

The *mokkan* features the recounting of a speech made by an individual, seemingly named 'Kun 軍,' before a certain lord ('*kun* 君'). Kun expresses resentment toward unnamed "enemies" and an intent to effect their deaths. Although there are some illegible characters on the bottom of the first side, I believe the quotation initiated by '*wal* 曰' carries over to the second side, ending after '*üi* 依,' where there is a rather large space left open before the following character, '*ko* 故.' There, the language shifts to describing actions, which seems to be prompted by the end of the speech. '*Pae* 背' can be taken as a verb indicating to "turn one's back," but the following character is considered to be indecipherable. However, the faint outline of the right side radical appears to be '*kan* 艮,' while the left radical resembles a standing heart radical, which makes this character possibly '*han* 恨,' an identification that would certainly befit the context. Ki's identification of the following character as '*chak* 作' is somewhat suspect, as there appears to be no person radical (亻) to the left of '*sa* 乍'; moreover, '*sa* 乍' arguably fits the context better, as an adverb which modifies the action that follows. In the case of the sequence '*kunggu* 弓穀,' however, Ki's identification is quite convincing. Even though the left side of '*ku* 穀' has been blotted over with ink, the outline of the '*kung* 弓' radical remains recognizable. It should be noted, however, that this sequence diverges from standard Sinitic word order in putting the direct object, '*kung* 弓,' before the verb, '*ku* 穀'. The following '*ilgammak* 日間落' provides a temporal context, while zooming out in order to end the scene. A more polished translation might look like this:

Side 1: □君前軍曰今敵白愾之心□□□

Side 2: 死所可依○故背恨□乍弓穀日間落

Side 1: Before Lord □, Kun said, "Now our enemies have revealed their ignorant hearts . . .

Side 2: They can depend on death." Thereupon he turned his back, and resentfully, swiftly drew back his bow. The sun, at that moment, set.

The inclusion of some rather obscure characters such as ‘*ku* 殼’ here suggests that this inscription is more than calligraphic practice, and would be more aptly described as composition practice. *Mokkan* featuring calligraphic practice generally exhibit the repetition of certain characters or sequences of characters and such practice is usually geared toward those graphs that might be considered more useful in drafting official documents or correspondence. There is no repetition in this inscription; rather, the author has deliberately chosen characters that seemed most appropriate for conveying the content. Words such as ‘*han* 恨’ [“resentfully”] work to portray the protagonist Kun’s (軍) state of mind, while adverbs such as ‘*sa* 乍’ [“swiftly”] serve as a bridge between Kun’s emotions and actions. Kun speaks directly here, characterizing his enemy as “ignorant” [*ta* 惰] in no uncertain terms, then declaring his own intentions and taking swift action. There is no real meter or rhyme at play here: the power of the text’s form is dependent on the deliberate and evocative word choices. However, with the thick brush strokes obscuring certain characters, this text hardly seems to have been composed to be easily read and understood by others. In fact, the attempt to dispose of it might suggest a desire to actively conceal it. Therefore, it is perhaps best understood as an example of “composition practice,” where the writer was experimenting with crafting a written narrative. In this case, the author may not have been particularly interested in conforming to any given Sinitic literary style, but the text clearly evokes the potential of individual Sinitic words.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Sites where *mokkan* have been recovered in Puyŏ are a small fraction (14%) of the total number of excavated sites with Paekche period features.²⁴ Meanwhile, a much larger number of sites have yielded ink stones, some of considerable quality (Kim C. 2001:425). This suggests that while the culture of writing in Sabi included *mokkan*, it was not constituted solely of them: *mokkan* filled a particular niche, namely for drafting, practicing, and experimenting with written language. Paper and stone would have also filled particular niches, with paper being the most precious and stone the most permanent surfaces for inscription. *Mokkan* made sense as a medium for disposable, preliminary, and provisional writing, but people would have turned to other materials when seeking something durable, sharable, or otherwise suitable for a “final” text.

If we understand *mokkan* as having this specific role in the culture of writing at Sabi, those that have survived can offer us an intriguing, yet necessarily only fragmentary, picture of the emergence of literary writing in Paekche. While I have only cited four examples in this article, all four represent moments in which individuals were making thoughtful inscriptive choices based on their understandings of the expressive possibilities of the Sinitic script. These examples indicate that by the Sabi period elites in Paekche were not only concerned with content, but with form, and that they actively practiced composition in addition to calligraphy. In their compositions, these elites exhibit an awareness of their medium that can only be characterized as a feature of a self-conscious written culture.

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NOTES

1. When I refer to writing in Paekche, I am speaking of Sinographic (Chinese character) script, which probably first became known to individuals on the Korean peninsula through contact with the Lelang 樂浪 commandery (108 B.C.E.–C.E. 313), an outpost of the Han dynasty (and later under the control of the Wei 魏 [C.E. 220–265] and Jin 晉 [C.E. 265–420]). There is currently no evidence that any other kind of writing was used on the Korean peninsula during the Three Kingdoms or Unified Silla periods.
2. Based on current evidence, *mokkan* use arguably diminishes on the peninsula post-seventh century; however, *mokkan* use peaks during the eighth century in Japan. Yun Sönt'ae (2007a:73) speculates that the reason *mokkan* continued to be used in large numbers in Japan alongside paper was not merely economic (i.e., that paper was harder to obtain/more expensive in Japan), but because *mokkan* seem to have been introduced to Japan (probably by individuals from Paekche) in the early part of the seventh century. Their use in Japan probably followed the example of the Korean kingdoms at that time, where *mokkan* and paper were used side by side in different capacities.
3. Lurie (2011:153, 162), writing about early historic Japan, notes the importance of *mokkan* in providing the literal material support (i.e., facilitating the flow of writing supplies) for the production of Queen-Consort Kōmyō's 光明皇后 copy of the *Yue Yi lun* 樂毅論, preserved in the Shōsōin 正倉院 (dated 744). As an important material surface for literacy acquisition (and the practice of calligraphy and composition) *mokkan* also arguably supported the functioning of written culture as a whole.
4. Fortuitously, the word *mokkan* is a Sinitic compound with the same pronunciation in Korean as in Japanese.
5. This figure includes *mokkan* from later periods. Early historic *mokkan* make up approximately 250,000 of these.
6. The two kingdoms of Paekche and Silla were in close proximity in the southern part of the peninsula, but they remained culturally distinct, retaining different foreign ties and regularly clashing with each other militarily until Paekche's final defeat by the combined forces of Silla and Tang China in 660. Linguistically, they both spoke southern Han languages that were probably closely related (Yi S. 2017:421), perhaps enough to be mutually intelligible, but their histories of the reception of literacy are quite distinct.
7. The relevant passage from the *Paekche Annals of Samguk sagi* is as follows: "13th year [612], 5th month. A flood inundated and destroyed houses of the populace" (Best 2006:356).
8. It should be noted that the current reconstructed Kungnamji does not accurately represent its scope or location during the Sabi period, although there is some overlap. Kungnamji Mokkan No. II-2 (discussed in this article) was found in an irrigation channel on the northwest side of the pond, meaning it may not have originated from the royal complex itself, but from some sort of facility in close proximity (Ki Kyōngnyang 2014:135; Kim Chaehong 2001:428).
9. The map in Figure 1 was created using ArcGIS[®] software by Esri. ArcGIS[®] and ArcMap[™] are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved. For information about Esri[®] software, visit www.esri.com.
10. This code is based on that used by the Japanese *mokkan* research society Mokkan Gakkai 木簡学会 and in the database of Japanese mokkan managed by the Nara National Institute for Cultural Properties 奈良文化財研究所. I have adopted these notations because standard markings have yet to be developed within Korean scholarship.
11. Progress on reconstructing the phonetic qualities of the Paekche language and Sino-Paekche sounds for Chinese characters is as yet insufficient to be reflected in my Romanizations. I look forward to a future moment when Sino-Paekche Romanizations may be possible.
12. One *toe* is a measurement for grain, traditionally 1/10 of a *mal* (斗) and 1/100 of a *sōm* (石). It is unknown if these relative values are accurate for Paekche. In Korea, one *mal* is the equivalent of ten *toe*, about 18 liters; *sōm* (石) is the largest measurement unit for grains, traditionally the equivalent of ten *mal*, one hundred *toe*, or 180 liters. The appearance of "large *toe*" 大升 and "small *toe*" 小升 here further complicates matters, though this distinction is not found on other inscriptions that can be similarly dated, so is largely a matter of speculation (Yi S. 2017:127). Kondō Kōichi (2004:99) understands 小升 as it appears on Han Juyan Tablets 居延漢簡 as equivalent to 1/3 of a 斗 (Ch. *dǒu*). Yun Sönt'ae (2007a:137–139) argues that the 大升 and 小升 that appear on the *mokkan* discussed here cannot be equated with the 大半升 and 少半升 of the Han texts analyzed by Kondō and suggests that they more likely represented an efficient shorthand for representing a "one person portion" (小升) and "two person portion" (大升). According to Yi Yonghyōn (2007:280–281), one "large *toe* 大升" was less than or equivalent to 1/3 of a *mal*, or 3 1/3 *toe*, while a "small *toe* 小升" was simply a way of distinguishing a normal *toe* from a "large *toe*."

13. The readings *mal*, *toe*, and *sōm* are based on traditional renderings of these characters into Korean (as attested in Middle Korean). In the case of *mal*, this reading is also supported by part of the inscription on Nūngsan-ni Mokkan No. 306, which has been deciphered as ‘斗之末^米’ [tu, this is *mal* (rice)] (the character 米 [rice] is actually written smaller and to the bottom right of 末, likely meant to be an annotation, indicating perhaps that *tu* = *mal* is the case “for rice”). This inscription appears to give a phonogram-based reading of the character 斗 as 末 (*mal*, or **mat*), with 之 seeming to function as either a genitive or appositive particle (this would be something akin to ‘*tu* in *mal* [mal, which is tu]’ or ‘*tu* ūi *mal* [tu, that is, *mal*]’ in modern Korean) (Yi S. 2017:125–126).
14. *Tosa* were officials dispatched from the center to administer territory in the provinces. See Kondō Kōichi (2004:102). The term is attested in inscriptions from all three peninsular kingdoms (Koguryō [ca. first century C.E.–668 C.E.], Paekche, Silla).
15. For this translation, I have followed Yun Sōnt’ae’s (2007a:141) interpretation. I offer a different interpretation in the following discussion.
16. There are several theories with regard to the identity of the *chiyaga* 支藥兒 entity. Yun Sōnt’ae (2007a:136; 142–143) has proposed that 支藥兒 was the name of a position for those who were in charge of the provision of medicinal plants grown in the provinces, while Yi Pyōngho (2008:78) argues that 支藥兒 was the name of a building or facility in charge of the distribution of rice or the storage of goods at the temple. Kondō Koichi (2008:344) argues that 支藥兒 is akin to the title 藥師 found on two of Silla King Chinhūng’s (r. 540–576) territorial tour steles and was likely someone responsible for distributing medicine to help stop the spread of disease. It is also possible to parse 支藥兒 as 支 + 藥兒, where 支 means “paid to” or “provided to,” so the name of the entity would have been simply “藥兒.” Yi Yonghyōn (2007) and Son Hwanil (2010) understand 支藥兒 in this way and interpret 支藥兒食米記 as a “record of meal rice provided to ‘Yaga 藥兒.’”
17. This is significant insofar as it is a clear challenge to the notion advanced by Kondō Koichi (2004) that the Nūngsan-ni *mokkan* pre-date the temple’s construction/are related instead to the construction of the capital city wall (Nasōng).
18. Son Hwanil (2010:241) reads the third side as providing something of narrative bridge between the provisions outlined on the first two sides to the following fourth side. He sees the first two sides as recording the provisions granted by some sort of central institution to ‘Yaga’ (藥兒), followed by a shift to describing a certain *tosa* named Mo Tae 牟陟 (on the third side), who then granted the additional provisions described on the fourth side. According to Son, it was at the home of the *tosa* Mo Tae that the scribe met a *sori* 小吏 who raised pigs and whose body was black (i.e., dirty).
19. Yun Sōnt’ae (2007a:138–144) does not offer a convincing theory as to why the content changes so drastically on the third side, but he does seem to acknowledge that the third side is likely a different sort of document or record than that of the first and second sides. Yun (2007b:83–87) argues that the third and fourth sides are both distinct from the “meal rice record” written on the first through second sides, with the third side containing short memos about individuals who had come from the provinces (he sees the text as primarily consisting of a list of names with either ranks or place names, reflected in the initial translation above) and the fourth side being calligraphic practice. Kondō Kōichi (2008:345) does not attempt to explain the third side’s function in relation to the other three sides, but argues that the text consists of the names and origins of officials from the provinces who had come to the facilities at Nūngsan-ni (temple or checkpoint), about whom a certain scribe felt the need to jot down some notes.
20. The character 次 is attested in personal names of individuals of Paekche background in Buddhist inscriptions from the early Unified Silla period (Yun 2007a:139–140).
21. The formulation 上拝 literally means “bowing upward,” but this is awkward in English. It also suggests the bow is being “offered up” to someone who is “above” the speaker, so I have translated it as “bowing before you” (i.e., “bowing in your presence”).
22. *Idu*, as Kim Yōnguk (2003) is using it, is an umbrella term to refer to methods of transcribing vernacular Korean language(s) using Sinographic characters. He argues this verse would have been read out loud (*hundok*) in the Paekche language.
23. I find Ki’s (2014:137–143) identifications convincing and so have opted to follow his reading. Munhwajaech’ōng and Kungnip’s (2011) is similar, though not as complete, as Ki’s:

Side 1: □君□軍曰今教白有之心□

Side 2: 死□□(所?)可依故背□三月□日間□

24. This number is quite different if we restrict the search to Ssangbung-ni, where 35 percent of sites have yielded *mokkan*. These figures calculated based on information provided by the Paekche Kodo Munhwa Chaedan [Ancient Paekche Capital Cultural Foundation], through their Paekche Sabi tosōng yujōk chōngbo sisūt’em [Paekche Sabi capital archaeological sites information system] website, accessible at www.thesabi.co.kr.

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