Reflections of Queen Sŏndŏk (r.632~647) in the 7th Century Silla

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I. Introduction

In Korea, three women rulers existed during the Silla 新羅 period. The first was Queen Sŏndŏk 善德女王 (r.632–647), the 27th ruler of Silla. The second
was Queen Chindok 鎮德女王 (r.647–654), the 28th ruler of Silla who succeeded Queen Sondok. The last of three was Queen Chinsong 建聖女王 (r.887–897), who ruled toward the end of Silla period as the 51st ruler. This paper will focus on Queen Sondok, the first female ruler recorded in Korean history. In order to understand the position of the first Queen we must explore the background of Silla kingdom along with its development stages during her reign.

Queen Sondok ascended to the throne succeeding her father King Chinp’yong 真平王 (r.579–632). However, a rebellion rose when the decision was made at the end of King Chinp’yong’s reign to position Dokman princess as the new Queen. With the king’s firm decision and the support of his loyal subjects and the people, kukin 國人,2) she ascended to the throne. Queen Sondok ruled until the end of her eventful life as the first Queen of Silla without usurpation challenging her, however a rebellion was triggered at the end of her reign. Also, she faced many diplomatic obstacles as the first Queen while she was on the throne.

Two significant historical texts still exists today offering insight on the Queen and her era. They are Samgukkagi 三國史記3) and Samgukhyusa 三國遺事4). Although they were both written and published during the Koryo 高麗 period, these records along with other related sources remain important materials to study

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1) This paper uses the title ‘Queen’ instead of the Queen’s original title ‘Sondok Wang’ (King Sondok) as referred in Samgukkagi. It may be more recognizable to the western audience referring her as the ‘Queen’ since there was and were female rulers who were called queens not kings in the western history.
2) Kukin 國人 may represent leading council members of Silla.
3) Samgukkagi, “The Record of the Three Kingdoms” was compiled by Kim Pu-sik and appointees with the support of the court in 1145 during the Koryo period.
4) Samgukhyusa, “The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms” was privately compiled by a Buddhist monk Ilyonin 1285 during the Koryo period.