

Portents and Politics in Early Choson Dynasty

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朝鮮 初期의 災異와 政治

요 약

한국 역사에는 수많은 災異의 기록이 남아 있다. 「三國史記」에 1,000개 「高麗史」에 6,500개 「朝鮮王朝實錄」에는 처음 120년 동안에 약 8,000개나 기록이 남아 있는 것이다. 이에 대한 역사적 의미는 이미 두어차례 국내 학계에서 발표한바 있으나, 이 글은 이번에 내한한 외국학자를 위해 다시 정리한 것이다.

董仲舒 이후 유교사상에 의하면 자연 속에 일어나는 재이는 정치의 잘못에 따라 발생한다는 해석이다. 재이탄 天이 지배자에게 보여 주는 정치의 잘못을 관정하는 거울이었다. 이 사상에 따라 태종, 세종 같은 조선초의 왕들은 자연현상의 변화에 민감한 반응을 보임으로써 스스로 유교사상에 충실한 왕노릇을 하여 왕권을 확고히 하려 했다.

그 결과는 한편 성공적이었으나 다른 면에서는 심각한 문제를 제기했다. 특히 태종 같은 왕은 재이에 대한 자기 책임을 강조함으로써 스스로의 지위를 확고히 할 수 있었다. 그러나 해마다 끊임없이 일어나는 재이에 대해 항상 반성하는 태도를 갖고 신하들에게 충고를 구하는 일은 그 뒤의 왕들에게는 육체적인 고통이었을 뿐만 아니라, 왕의 권위를 줄이는 것으로 해석되기 시작했다.

세조도 이런 점에서 전통적인 재이 사상을 벗어나려는 모습을 보이지만 특히 연산군은 내놓고 재이설에 항거했다. 그는 재이탄 정치의 잘못과는 아무 상관도 없다면서 왕권의 강화를 위해 신하들과 대립했다. 그 결과 주로 재이설의 부정과 그것이 의미하는 유교정치의 부정 때문에 그는 왕위에서 쫓겨났던 것이다. 조선초의 재이기록은 왕과 신하 사이의 권력균형을 좌우하는 중요한 요인이었던 것이다.

In his letter to Rome, St. Francis Xavier in Japan wrote as following:

The Christian fathers who would come to Japan must be academically well-prepared to answer all sorts of questions the Japanese would ask. The missionaries, I hope, must be philosophers. Still better if they are trained dialecticians who will be able to point out the errors for the part of the Japanese in their debates. Furthermore I strongly recommend they shall have enough knowledge about nature, because the Japanese are always eager to know more about the reasons why the heavenly bodies move as they do, as well as about the solar eclipses and the phasings of the moon and so on. Rain and sleet, comets, thunder and lightning...all these and other natural phenomena must be satisfactorily explained to the people of Japan to gain their hearts.

Xavier wrote this letter in 1552, and decades later Matteo Ricci in China sent a letter to Rome in a remarkably similar vein. As these missionaries observed correctly, the people in the Far East were particularly concerned with natural phenomena in their entire period of traditional history. Their unusually keen attention was shown to the unusual phenomena in nature, or portents as I shall call them from now on.

It is generally understood among the historians that portents have some political functions in the traditional history of the Far East. But little is known about the political functions of

portents in Korean history. Since traditional historiography in Korea shows an enormous amount of portents to us today, any history today without due consideration to them will remain as incomplete, if not biased. According to my compilations, the total number of portents in the *Samguk sagi* (三國史記) is about 1,000; while the *Koryŏ-Sa* (高麗史) has 6,500 portents and the *Veritable Records of Chosŏn Dynasty* (實錄) has additional 8,000 during the first century of the dynasty.

Before Confucianism became the dominant political ideology toward the end of Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392), portents were largely seen in religious context and exorcised as such, through prayers of Buddhistic, Taoistic, and shamanistic styles. From the declining years of Koryŏ, however, Koreans' responses to portents began to experience a notable change. Yet Confucian portentology did not remain uniform. The records show high fluctuations in the distribution of different portents in different periods. Also noticed are the changing attitudes toward portents in differing reign periods. Only with some ups and downs Confucian portentology was established into the body politic of Chosŏn Korea.

Rise of Confucian Portentology

During the earlier period of Chosŏn Dynasty all the major kings showed highly Confucian responses to portents. Portents were seen as signs of Heaven's pleasure or displeasure over the political developments run by the kings as the holders of the Mandate of Heaven (天命). Kings T'aejong (太宗, r. 1401-1418), Sejong (世宗, r. 1418-1450), and Sŏngjong (成宗, r. 1469-1494) among others, were those who helped to establish Confucian portentology in the period. Since portents were considered as Heaven's signs, the rulers have to express their sincere efforts to rectify any wrongs in their country. The standard efforts to that effect were abstention from music and wine, simplification of king's diet, halt of public works and local tributes, pardons, appeal for counsel, among others. Among these standard measures, the king's appeal for counsel was of particular importance, because such an occasion could be effectively utilized by his subjects to vent their complaints and even to criticise the monarch. Portents in this sense served as a major check in the exercises of royal prerogatives.

But there is the other side of this coin. Since this was the Confucian political ideology of the times, the earlier kings of the new dynasty consolidated ideological legitimacy of their kingship by their abiding to the ideology. Portents, therefore, served a double-edged sword in the power games of a Confucian state. By his show of willingness and preparedness to portents, King T'aejong emerged himself as a master of the games. At least in three occasions of portents he had even expressed his intention to abdicate the throne for his crown prince, only to clear political opposition in his court in the middle of the universal opposition to his abdication. I do not know whether his expressed intentions for the three occasions were serious or not. But when he did abdicate his throne in 1418, it was occasioned by another portent.

King T'aejong tried to take full blames for all the portents. He was particularly sensitive to droughts, for they were damaging to any agrarian society. At an occasion of severe drought, he confessed his regrets for killing his own brothers and their supporters in his struggle for power. With another drought he punished himself by staying under the burning sun

for many hours and for many days, thus developing a serious case of diarrhea. As a matter of fact, he left a lasting legend in Korean history in this context. According to a legend at the turn of the nineteenth century, there was rain on the tenth day of the fifth month every year without exception in Korea. Koreans called it "the rain of King T'aejong," because people believed that the rain was possible thanks to T'aejong's avowal to the effect at his death-bed in 1422. More or less similar efforts were shown by Kings Sejong and Sŏngjong. When a man was struck dead by thunderbolt in 1490, King Sŏngjong announced a general pardon which made some 800 former officials recover their service certificates (職牒). Perhaps this was the largest pardon ever announced in traditional Korea. Comets were another kind of important portents in the period. A comet was seen as prognosticating a sudden change in politics. Naturally comets were observed in two coup attempts of the period—one by the "six loyal subjects" and the other by General Nam I (南怡).

Reactions to Confucian Portentology

Developments of portent politics in the early period of Chosŏn, however, did not continue without interruptions. We can document such cases from two reign periods of King Sejo (世祖, r. 1455–1468) and King Yŏnsan (燕山君, r. 1495–1506). What made King Sejo special in his response to portents was the unusual number of auspices his reign was blessed with. All the Chosŏn kings before him either declined to be congratulated with auspicious portents, or refused any auspicious interpretations therefrom. It was totally different in the case of King Sejo, who openly accepted blessings and celebrated such occasions whenever sweet dew or albino animals were reported. Obviously he needed them to justify his usurpation of the throne from his nephew king. It seemingly indicate that the usurper king had enjoyed high degree of personal power as well as freedom from Confucian criticism during his reign.

Sejo's attitude toward portents, though a clear deviation from the emerging orthodox view of portents, was not a total denial of basic concepts of portent politics *a la* Confucianism. Yŏnsan was the only king in Korean history who tried to break the spell of portents, and it meant a headlong collision with the Confucian philosophy of the literati. His battle started with a winter lightning in the third year of his reign (1497), when he tried to put the blame for the portent at the feet of his subjects instead of making self-castigations. Next year a similar occasion was met with a royal interpretation that the portent was a sign of king's weakness before his powerful subjects. When a comet was reported to the throne in 1500, he tried to suppress the news from his censor-officials. His challenge to portentology showed a great deal of determination in 1503 when he refused to announce an appeal for counsel at the appearance of a portent. Soon any criticism occasioned by portents was considered as an anathema, and the king began to punish retroactively such critics of the past. Finally in 1506, the last year of his reign, King Yŏnsan decreed a ban of any report of portents.

Only two days later, however, the Office of Astronomy reported a comet, perhaps because it had been considered very serious. All the high officials were summoned immediately and they were told,

It is already decreed not to report any portent. Then what is this for? The way of Heaven is far and difficult to fathom. In the ancient times there were nine years' flood in Yao's reign and seven years' drought in T'ang's period. With the virtue of Yao(堯) and T'ang(湯), how could they be due to the lack of virtue for their parts? These were accidents of Heaven, and not because of failures in human affairs. Unworthy men discuss portents according to their personal views, and this is against Heaven's way.

So the Office of Astronomy(觀象監) was demoted to Bureau(司曆署) of Calendar to take charge of time-keeping only. Two months later he was expelled from the throne, thus giving Korean history the only period with no office in charge of astronomy.

The argument raised by King Yŏnsan about the independence of human affairs from natural phenomena was not fresh with him. Already during the reign of his father, King Sŏngjong, Im Sa-hong(任士洪, ? - 1506) had once indicated that a soily rain(雨土) could not portend anything. His position, when it was known among his fellow literati, was universally and violently condemned as a heresy of Wang An-shih(王安石), resulting in his banishment and the removal of his father from the high post in government. It is quite possible that Yŏnsan's attitude had some connection with Im Sa-hong's, since Im was very powerful in Yŏnsan's reign.

Revival of Confucian Portentology

The 1506 coup of King Chungjong (r. 1506 - 1544) signalled the revival of portent politics in Chosŏn society. The celebrated episode about the rise and fall of the young scholars led by Cho Kwang-jo(趙光祖, 1482 - 1519) marks the high point reached by censorial power. And the censorial power of the literati became a dominant factor of Korean politics for the rest of the dynasty. In all their censorial activities the literati continued to utilize portents as occasions for remonstrance.

With all the lip service to portents, however, the actual weight of portents was gradually diminishing for the rest of the dynasty. In the earlier period of the dynasty portents served two opposite goals of consolidating the royal legitimacy on the one hand and the taming the monarchical power on the other. With the progress of the dynasty the first goal was becoming obsolete as the legitimacy of the royal house was firmly established as a tradition. Now the only function remaining for portents in Korean politics was as a check on the monarchical power. And it was in this connection that the oust of King Yŏnsan was a victory for the part of the Confucian literati. Even here, however, the victory of the literati was somewhat deceptive. The victory might have been much more significant if the Korean kings of the later period were as ambitious and healthy as their earlier ancestors. But few kings after mid-Chosŏn were healthy mentally and physically. With little political ambitions shown by the kings, portents had little function to play, for there were no kings to tame.

Furthermore Confucian portentology was seriously questioned by later scholars, notably by *sirhak*(實學) scholars. From seventeenth century on portentology was openly criticized and portents were seen more and more merely as natural phenomena among the scholars, although portent politics were still played as formalities in court.