

<팬데믹 이후의 21 세기 동아시아와 동아시아 문화를 생각한다: 지식체계의 변동과 권력 이동을 중심으로> 단국대학교 일본연구소 8 월 29 일

## Death as a socio-political event: An alternative to some European views on the success of dealing with Covid-19 in East Asia

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*Calamities do not occur by chance* 災變果非偶然

King Jungjong 中宗 (r. 1506-1544)

*Introduction: The Covid-19 crisis and governmental responsibility*

The global corona crisis currently gripping the world has provoked a wide range of governmental approaches in different parts of the world. In the beginning it spread in East Asia. The next hotspot was the Middle East and Europe followed by the US. It has then continued to spread to other parts of the world. In contrast to the comparatively successful handling of the virus in East Asia, Europe was hardly hit before the region started to come to grips with the virus after most governments had implemented strict lockdown rules. As these rules are now eased, many countries are witnessing a resurgence in the number of cases

Naturally, this pandemic has developed beyond being a biological event to become an increasingly socio-political event of historical dimensions. Observers on the development in the United Kingdom reflect on the fact that whereas the virus started to spread in affluent areas such as the Chelsea and Kingston after people returned from ski holidays in Italy, later the most severely hit areas, both in terms of number of confirmed cases and deaths, are deprived areas characterised by poverty and poor housing conditions. The detrimental economic and social costs of the lockdowns have also directed focus on the role of government policies. Given the high stakes and intensive scrutiny, most government, like the UK government, have defended

their measurers, claiming that they are following scientific advice and ‘doing the best they can in this unprecedented situation.’

In their efforts to justify their policies, governments – and media following in their footsteps – keep a close eye on developments on other countries. The situation in neighbouring countries is seen as a result of the policies and performances of those governments, disregarding other factors that might influence the situation. A country in case is Sweden that has adopted a rather different approach to other European countries, not implementing a strict lockdown. While the situation in terms of confirmed cases and deaths is more severe in Sweden than in neighbouring Scandinavian countries, it does not compare that unfavourably with some parts of Europe. Even though the situation is worse the UK, British media frequently report about the problems Sweden is experiencing.

When looking at the response of governments in East Asia – in particular China and South Korea – European governments and media of course have to acknowledge that the region has been comparatively successful. However, in the same efforts to try to justify one’s own countries policies and results, their interpretation has been that given the socio-political context, or political culture, in those countries, the governments there are able to implement intrusive measurers that are more difficult to introduce in Europe. A good example of this is the discussion on the ‘human rights’ issues surrounding track and trace policies and measurers. BBC explained that this is easier to implement in countries like China and South Korea as the governments there have a higher degree of control over their populations through personal identification numbers etc. When the Norwegian government abandoned their efforts to implement a track and trace system, they cited concerns that it infringed on human rights. The Covid-19 crisis has thus highlighted some basic notions of how the West looks at itself and East Asia.

In this paper I will not engage in a refutation of such notions, but instead provide an alternative approach based on my understanding of the history of the region. The 1976 book *Plagues and People* by the American historian William H. McNeil has been credited for highlighting the role of plagues in historical development, their social and political ramifications.<sup>1</sup> This, however, would be nothing new in Confucian understanding of history where there was a tradition of viewing pandemics as socio-political event, seeing them as both indicative of the socio-political situation and a cause of historical change. Such notions also guided Confucian

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<sup>1</sup> William H. McNeil, *Plagues and People* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976).

states policies regarding not only epidemic but also other catastrophes. The aim of this paper is not to extol Confucian statecraft – it will simply be based on the observation that there was a tradition in Confucian statecraft to regard all unnatural deaths as a socio-political event and look at what consequences this had for state policies.

*Epidemics, the Balance of Heaven and Earth and the Mandate of Heaven*

Between 1717 and 1719, during the reign of Sukjong 肅宗 (r. 1674-1720), Joseon was afflicted by a wave of epidemic disease that is estimated to have taken 35,000 lives. In the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1718, the King ordered his highest ministers to hold a rite to ward off the spirits causing the disease and in his sacrificial speech he said:

*An epidemic as severe as the one we are suffering today is rare to see in the records of history. It is like an unrelenting ferocious fire spreading across the fields. It has now continued for 3 years, repeatedly spreading again after briefly receding, and there is no family that has not been afflicted and no person that has not been ill. Ah, the disaster of war might be cruel, but at least there are areas that are not afflicted; no matter how severe a crop failure is, there is always one place better off than the other - how come only epidemics can be as cruel as this? When summer comes farming is abandoned and waste fields can be seen everywhere, and in winter they all huddle together with famine and cold ravishing their bodies. Sometimes whole households have died, there is no one to look after and bury the dead bodies that lie in a row [...] If it continues like this there will be no mankind left, and with no mankind left, who can the state rely on [...]?*<sup>2</sup>

After this vivid description, Sukjong described the way forward. The previous year he had handed over regency to the crown prince, which was a start, as he said, presumably meaning that the affliction was caused by his own lack of moral qualities. What now needed to be done was to: “employ and entrust suitable people so that spirits and people can rejoice together, lead properly so that the harmony of Heaven and Earth unfolds, and make sure that everything receives their proper place.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sukjong sillok 44/11/23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

During the reign of Yeongjo 英祖 (r. 1724-1776) we can similar notions being expressed. In a petition Fourth Censor Yi Changha 李長夏 began by saying that history had seldom seen such epidemics as they were suffering then, and that the roads were filled with corpses. He argued that it was energy of grievance (*won'gi* 冤氣) that had reached up to Heaven, causing this calamity. Then he turned to the cause of the grievance, which was the economic situation at the time. The collection of debts has resulted in many people unable to pay ending up in jail where some people committed suicide and other fell prey to epidemics. He expressed strong fears that this would unsettle the Balance of Heaven and Earth. The way to avoid further calamity, he argued, was to increase the respite on debts so that people could recover their lives.<sup>4</sup>

In both these cases we can see that a link is made between state policies and the outbreak of epidemics, the rhetoric expressing governmental responsibility for them. A key notion making all unnatural deaths socio-political was the Harmony of Heaven and Earth (*hwagi* 和氣). Any death causing grievance could disturb this balance, which in the end could lead to the withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven for the ruler.

Something else King Sukjong did the winter of 1718/19 was to give material compensation to bereaved families in the form of *hyuljeon* 恤典.<sup>5</sup> This was a practical way for the government to show that they took responsibility for the deaths. To illustrate how the state increasingly took responsibility for unnatural deaths (as least notionally) in this manner, this paper will detail how this *hyuljeon* system developed.

### *Hyuljeon: unnatural deaths as socio-political events*

*Hyuljeon* originally meant measures to honour people in high official positions who died unnatural or accidental deaths. Later, however, as the notion that all unnatural deaths were the responsibility of the state developed, the range of people upon whom *hyuljeon* could be bestowed widened, the system no longer being limited to high officials, and as it broadened in scope, it came to center on financial compensation.

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<sup>4</sup> Bibyeonsa deungnok, Yeongjo 26/4/5.

<sup>5</sup> Sukjong sillok 45/1/6.

In 1443 King Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418-1450) gave the following order to the Ministry of Rites:

*It has already been legislated that financial aid for funeral expenses and tax-exempt status shall be given to [the families of] those who meet with an accident and die while defending our borders or performing corvée labour in the capital or the provinces, or those who are killed by the enemy or taken prisoner. But for those who meet with an accident and die because of their official duties, to them no funeral aid or tax-exempt status is given, and this is an error. From now on the scope of *hyuljeon* shall be widened [and] given to all who meet with an accident and die because of their official duties.<sup>6</sup>*

However, it is not until 1479 that we find the first record of *hyuljeon* being bestowed in this manner. In 1477 eight inhabitants of Jeju Island had embarked on a ship to transport mandarin oranges in tribute to the state. They met rough weather and were cast adrift. Five of them drowned and the rest were shipwrecked on the Ryukyu Islands. Subsequently, in 1479 the survivors were brought back to Joseon with a returning envoy, and their story was reported to the throne. Upon hearing this, the king decided that *hyuljeon* should be bestowed upon those who had drowned.<sup>7</sup>

These Jeju Island inhabitants died while transporting tribute, so in that sense they were performing an official duty. However, soon it would rather be the accidental death in itself, regardless of any official duty performed, that would be raised as one of the criteria for material compensation. In 1515 we can see such a case when the north-western provinces of Pyeongan and Hwanghae were flooded and more than one hundred people reportedly drowned. The provision of *hyuljeon* was requested for all the people affected. However, in the end the request was turned down, although King Jungjong admitted that ‘calamities do not occur by chance’.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of aid to disaster-stricken people was again raised in the summer of 1519, when the country was once again struck by flooding; Gyeonggi province being worst affected this time. The discussions held at this time shows that the considerations were not only ideological gestures, but also rather practical. On the seventh day of the eleventh month it was decided that royally sponsored memorial rituals should be held for people buried in landslides in Yangju

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<sup>6</sup> Sejong sillok 25/8/11.

<sup>7</sup> Seongjong sillok 10/5/17

<sup>8</sup> Jungjong sillok 10/7/18

county.<sup>9</sup> However, two days later Jungjong was advised to pay for funeral expenses instead. Prime State Councillor Jeong Gwangpil 鄭光弼 (1462-1538) said:

*As for royally sponsored memorial rituals, as this shows Your Highness' utmost sincerity in guarding against natural disasters and protecting the innocent people, there is nothing incorrect in this. But as this is not something we can find in the regulations for memorial rituals of this country, Your Highness is not obliged to sponsor these services, it is enough to provide funds for the funeral and look after the family. After all, this is not the same as cases of people who die in battle.*<sup>10</sup>

Right State Councillor An Tang 安塘 (1461-1521) added:

*We already have the example of yeoje to provide memorial rituals for people with no one to look after them, so there is nothing wrong in having royally sponsored memorial rituals for those lost in landslides. But if the bodies of the deceased are recovered and we provide funds for their funerals and provide the families with hyuljeon so that they can have their own ceremonies, then there is no need to hold royally sponsored rituals. However, if the body isn't found, or if it is a person without family, then it is possible to hold a memorial, despite the fact that this cannot be found in our regulations for memorial rituals.*<sup>11</sup>

Slowly the practice of bestowing *hyuljeon* upon people afflicted by natural and other forms of disaster, regardless of official duty or social status, became standard. In 1525 the issue of such compensation was raised in connection with, among other things, an epidemic in Pyeongan province and a blizzard in Hamgyeong province.<sup>12</sup> The system had thus changed from being a way of honouring dead officials to a method of the government taking responsibility and helping families that had been deprived of members through calamity.

As discussed above, the notion that natural disasters were sent by heaven to show dissatisfaction with unworthy kings was central to Confucian ideology, and this idea indeed played an important role in the above-described change in the *hyuljeon* system. This can be seen in discussions held at court in 1547, the second year of King Myeongjong (r. 1545-1567),

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<sup>9</sup> Jungjong sillok 14/7/11

<sup>10</sup> Jungjong sillok 14/7/13

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jungjong sillok 20/1/17; Ibid. 20/12/11.

a year when the country was afflicted by both drought and flooding, in addition to hail and landslides. Reportedly, by showing his compassion through the bestowal of *hyuljeon* upon those who died in these disasters, King Myeongjong wished to atone for his moral deficiencies that had caused them. “Heaven has sent these calamities because a person of shallow moral qualities like me unworthily participate in the affairs of the state and repeatedly fail in policies.”<sup>13</sup>

This changed character of the system can furthermore be seen in discussions at court in 1673, this time occasioned by concerns from the King’s ministers about the increased scope of these policies. 1673 saw a severe famine afflicting the country, a situation that was caused by the previous year’s crop failure. Discussing the difficult tasks administrators faced at such times, Left Vice Royal Secretary Sim Chae 沈粹 (1624-1693) said:

*To execute hyuljeon is indeed a most beautiful act of an age of sages. But to report and ensure that all people killed by tigers, drowned while crossing waters, crushed to death, or killed in fire receive hyuljeon, is that not a too cumbersome and distracting task?*<sup>14</sup>

Left State Councillor Heo Jeok 許積 (1610-1680) added:

*In the past hyuljeon was only given to people who died while performing meritorious services, but as the hyuljeon of today is given without any distinction between public and private matters, and the death of a person is directly compensated with three seom of grain, we cannot but worry about the corrupt practices of local clerks.*<sup>15</sup>

We can see that *hyuljeon* was provided in an increased range of cases, including individual cases of death not related to large-scale natural catastrophes, and that use of the system had increased in frequency to the extent that some statesmen worried that it distracted local officials from other duties. The bestowal of compensation in cases of major natural calamities continued as well, though, and was sometimes given to as many as 600 people.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the type of cases discussed above, other instances of unnatural deaths for which *hyuljeon* was bestowed include food poisoning, suicide, murder, starvation, killed by tigers or

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<sup>13</sup> Myeongjong sillok 2/7/4.

<sup>14</sup> Hyeonjong sillok 12/2/21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sukjong sillok 18/8/3.

other beasts, and trampled to death by a crowd. As for starvation, during the reign of Hyeonjong (r. 1659-1674), *hyuljeon* was bestowed on more than a hundred people.<sup>17</sup> The problem of people killed by tigers could at times be quite serious. In 1754 in central Gyeonggi province, for example, more than 120 people were reportedly killed within one month. During the same year more than 100 people were reported killed in Gangwon province in the ninth month, with eighty-one new cases being reported just two months later.<sup>18</sup> The families of all these victims were given compensation.

Furthermore, during the reign of Sukjong this form of relief was also bestowed on people who committed suicide because they could not endure hunger. It started in the second month of 1683 when a man of gentry background from Puan abandoned his wife and children and broke a hole in the ice and drowned himself. This time the blame was placed on the central government's representative in the area: "if the officer in charge of protecting the land allows the people to starve and die it is difficult not to hold him responsible. *Hyuljeon* was bestowed on the man, his family was given grain, and the local official was punished.<sup>19</sup> In the eighth month of the following year, three families in Jeolla province committed suicide when faced with a severe crop failure, and *hyuljeon* was bestowed upon them with material compensation being given to their relatives.<sup>20</sup>

Another interesting case of a different character is also reported during the reign of Sukjong. In 1686 the king proceeded to the Seonggyun'gwan Academy to pay his respects to the sages of old and officiate a ritual. After the ritual he returned to the procession tent to hold an examination at the Myeongnyundang Hall. However, scholars from the capital and provinces had heard rumours of this and gathered in large numbers. Following the advice of the Royal Lecturers, the king had the west wall of the Myeongnyundang torn down to open it up to the outer yard of the Bicheondang Hall and then he ordered that any disorder or crowding must be stopped. However, at this the examinees started to fight with each other to get into the yard first. People fell over and eight were trampled to death, with many more seriously injured, and it was reported that the screaming would not cease. Hearing this, the king was greatly shocked and sent medical officers and medicine to look after those who were still alive. He bestowed

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<sup>17</sup> Hyeonjong sillok 7/8/26 (13 people); 11/7/19 (11 people); 11/8/23 (1 person); 11/8/28 (1 person); 12/2/18 (80 people).

<sup>18</sup> Yeongjo sillok 30/intercalary 4/ 19; 30/9/9; 30/11/1.

<sup>19</sup> Sukjong sillok 9/2/12.

<sup>20</sup> Sukjong sillok 10/8/25.



*hyuljeon* upon those who had died, and if they had come from the countryside, he had their bodies returned on funeral biers.<sup>21</sup>

As for the concept of *hyuljeon*, rather than its practical application, by the late eighteenth century it had been broadened to also represent the state's ambition to support those afflicted by bereavement in a more long-term perspective. In the twelfth month of 1763, King Yeongjo argued that "to look after and aid the 'four people' [widowers, widows, orphans and childless] is the most important task in kingly rule" and he sent an order to all counties in the country that *hyuljeon* should be bestowed upon them. The entry in the Yeongjo sillok details how it was only one magistrate in the whole country who claimed that there were no widowers, widows, orphans or children in his county, which occasioned the King to send out an inspector who of course discovered that there were. The magistrate was accordingly punished.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, around the mid-eighteenth century decisions at court to bestow *hyuljeon* began to be less concerned with specific cases, and rather seem to have been based on a list of cases presented by the provincial governors.<sup>23</sup> Whereas earlier entries in the chronicles often describe individual cases in detail, from that time on such support was only recorded in the form of simple summaries. This seems to indicate that the frequency with which it was given by governors increased, and that a certain bureaucratic mechanism had been introduced.

The late eighteenth century witnessed more systematisation. In 1778 the need for clearer rules on the granting of *hyuljeon* was discussed at court. King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800) pointed out that the practice varied between the different provinces. The general principle was that it was given on royal decision after a request had been made by the governor. But in some provinces, it would be given after a special royal order even though the governor had not requested it. In other provinces it was bestowed directly, and only after this was it reported to the State Council and the king. In yet other provinces, it was neither done directly nor requested, but rather done on orders from the Ministry of Taxation. Finally, in some provinces it was not given even though hundreds of people had died due to one of the causes listed as criteria for support. The cause for this last situation was said to be the rule that *hyuljeon* would be given only if more than three people in a county had died or were afflicted. As this created severe inequalities the

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<sup>21</sup> Sukjong sillok 12/4/3.

<sup>22</sup> Yeongjo sillok 39/12/11.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example Yeongjo sillok 24/4/20; 24/5/6; 24/6/23.

king ordered that from that time on it should be provided without reference to the rule about three afflicted people in a county.<sup>24</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The purpose of this paper has been to illustrate how in Joseon Korea the state, as a result of the notion that all unnatural deaths were socio-political events, developed policies to provide support for families that had lost members due to such unnatural deaths. Of course, not all such cases could in the end be covered by *hyuljeon*, and the support was not continuous and in that sense a gesture. However, as we can see, the practical matters involved were extensively discussed and more importantly it reflects the notions that the government taking such responsibility was part of what constituted good governance. While it might be difficult to link contemporary government policies to traditional political culture, hopefully this could provide another way of looking at the relative success of dealing with Covid-19 in East Asia than the one currently being expressed in European media.

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<sup>24</sup> Jeongjo sillok 2/10/23