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Wonders and Politics of the Chosŏn Dynasty: Reflections on the Unexplored Side of the Chosŏn Neo-Confucian System

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Abstract: Wonder was deeply rooted in the Chosŏn Neo-Confucian system. Through this wonder, we can see various layers of consciousness of Neo-Confucian scholars. Exploring the use of the element of wonder in political and scholarly areas requires more than just looking at aspects that have been neglected. This task is meaningful in that it shows the multi-layers of Neo-Confucianism in the Chosŏn era. It also provides an opportunity to examine how Confucianism intersected with other religions of the time. This allowed Neo-Confucianism to be more closely aligned with the general views of Chosŏn society.

Keywords: wonder; Confucianism; Neo-Confucianism; Chosŏn; politics

1. Introduction

Yŏnghŏm (lit. numinous verification 靈驗, wonder hereafter) can refer to a mystical experience based on a religious system or faith. Many anecdotal accounts of wonder present narratives in which a conflict or tension was resolved through a personal mystical experience and, consequently, religious authority was strengthened (Takamatsu 2022). Wonder is a term that is highly religious in nature. However, in a society where the belief in supernatural phenomena greatly influenced people's way of thinking, wonder was not just accepted as a religious phenomenon, but it also had a great influence on politics. Especially in pre-modern society, wonders and politics were very closely related. This was true in pre-modern Asia, as can be seen in the theory of calamity that connects the emperor's actions to natural disasters (Hihara 1986).

However, if we look at the research of wonder in Asian religious thought, we can see that most of them are related to Buddhism, Daoism, or shamanism (Jung 2011; Berezkin 2023; Ko and Choe 2024). Previously, there were not many studies of wonder in Confucianism. Recently, however, research on the connection between religious aspects and political ideas of Confucianism has gradually increased. For example, the point that supernatural elements and rituals from other religions were utilized to legitimize Yi Sŏnggye's ascension to the throne (Baker 2013) shows that the process of Confucianization in Chosŏn was gradual rather than abrupt and that Confucianization did not necessarily mean a departure from other religious ideas. Many studies of late Chosŏn rituals also help to shed light on the religious character embedded in the Chosŏn's political system. However, there is still not much research on the relationship between Confucianism and political thought in Chosŏn.

The influence of wonder on Chosŏn's political thought was extensive and layered. The ways in which wonder influenced Confucianism in Chosŏn had some similarities to those in existing religious systems such as Buddhism, but there were also differences. Neo-Confucian scholars, such as Chŏng Tojŏn (1342–1398), were committed to using Confucianism to revolutionize the state's governance system. They rejected the existing religions, such as Buddhism and Daoism, which had dominated the religious belief system of Koryŏ society, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to Confucianism. They instead sought to Confucianize society from all sides. The *Pulssi chappyŏn* 佛氏雜辨 (*An Array*



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of *Critiques of Buddhism*), written by Chŏng Tojŏn, is a good example of this attempt. In this text, Chŏng used Neo-Confucian teachings to point out the doctrinal errors in Buddhism, emphasized the fact that Confucian sages had long condemned Buddhism, and criticized the harmful effects of Buddhism on society. Confucian scholars, such as Chŏng Tojŏn, distanced themselves from other Buddhist systems, and inevitably, therefore, the way they used wonder could not simply copy the methods of other religions. Nevertheless, Confucian scholars in Chosŏn used wonder to gain political and academic authority on various levels.

This paper aims to examine the relationship between Confucian politics and the wonder of the Chosŏn era, by studying how wonder was used in some important junctures of Chosŏn political and intellectual history. First, it examines the use of wonder to legitimize political and ideological authority. From the founding of the dynasty, wonder was utilized as a tool to support the political authority of Chosŏn as a Confucian state. In Chosŏn, where achievement in the ideological or philosophical realm of Neo-Confucianism was valued, mystical experiences were also at the root of ideological authority. This paper examines some of these cases to explore the relationship between Confucianism and religious wonder. Then, this paper examines various efforts to realize political and ideological values through wonder. Especially when political and ideological values clashed, the element of wonder served to secure one's legitimacy. In times of crisis, in the face of unjust power, Chosŏn scholars and officials sought to secure their authority by appropriating wonder. This paper carefully examines these aspects. Through the examination of Confucian wonder, this paper aims to lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of Neo-Confucianism in the Chosŏn period.

2. Legitimization of Political Authority

What is interesting is the political system that the Neo-Confucian scholars relied on as they were trying to overcome what they called "superstitious elements" of the other religions. Given the Neo-Confucian scholars' efforts to combat superstition, the political system they relied on should have been free of superstitious elements, but paradoxically, the foundation of Chosŏn, which gave the Neo-Confucian scholars scholarly power and authority, was, in fact, justified by these wondrous events.

The *Yongbi ŏch'ŏnga* 龍飛御天歌 (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*) was written to declare the legitimacy of the foundation of the Chosŏn dynasty, containing the heroic stories of King T'aejo 太祖 Yi Sŏnggye 李成桂 (1335–1408; r. 1392–1398) and his ancestors. It was created during the reign of the fourth king Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–1450). Sejong's reign is especially well-known for cultural development and the establishment of the Confucian ruling system. Sejong is also known as a monarch who was faithful to Confucianism. However, there are records in the *Yongbi ŏch'ŏnga* about extraordinary wonders performed by his ancestors that were intended to justify and glorify the foundation of Chosŏn. These wonders were recorded in the text compiled by the state to prove that the founder of Chosŏn and his ancestors had received a divine mandate from heaven. The wondrous experiences of King T'aejo and his ancestors were used to give legitimacy to the foundation of Chosŏn. This was the moment when personal wonders were transformed into state wonders. However, the late Chosŏn scholar Yi Ik 李穡 (1681–1763) criticized the text for being secular in style and too miscellaneous in content,¹ which reflects the unwillingness of Confucian scholars to recognize the wonders related to the royal lineage. Nonetheless, the auspicious events that King T'aejo's ancestral lineage experienced from generation to generation were also recorded at the very beginning of the *T'aejo sillok*, not only in the *Yongbi ŏch'ŏnga*.² This fact is significant because the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (*Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty*; hereafter, *Sillok*) is an official record that represents the king and the state. The wonders of the founder's family became the wonders to legitimize the foundation of a new state.

In modern countries, the legitimacy of political leaders is mostly secured by the institutional form of democracy. However, in pre-modern states, political leaders were not

elected through such an institution. The basis for the political authority of the king, the leader of a dynastic state, was fragile. In reality, he had political authority just because he was a monarch, so a lot of effort was put into laying a basis for his political authority. In most of the East Asian countries, the political authority of the king was sought through his connection to heaven. In particular, T'aejo Yi Sŏnggye was an official of the previous dynasty, Koryŏ, but he eventually overthrew Koryŏ and established a new state. This was an unacceptable act in terms of the moral ethics emphasized in Confucianism; therefore, King T'aejo's political authority was difficult to justify within the scholarly scope of Confucianism. Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342–1398), in his *Chosŏn kyŏnggukchŏn* 朝鮮經國典 (*Administrative Code of Chosŏn*), strongly argued that the foundation of Chosŏn made sweeping reforms of various institutions possible.³ His argument aimed to justify the foundation from the perspective of socio-political reforms. However, despite this attempt, Yi's founding of Chosŏn could be branded as treacherous from the perspective of Confucianism. In the end, the justification for the foundation of Chosŏn had to come from outside of the scholarly dimension, that is, following a rather conventional rhetoric that King T'aejo and his family became the royal lineage by receiving a mandate from heaven. Those who emphasized the legitimacy of the foundation of Chosŏn turned to the mysterious events of King T'aejo and his ancestors.

One might argue that this was a unique historical circumstance that only occurred in the context of the foundation of Chosŏn. One might think that once the political system was stable, the king would not need to utilize wondrous elements to prove his authority. However, elements of wonder were still needed to prove the king's authority. Even after the foundation of Chosŏn was no longer in moral dispute, the element of wonder was still necessary. The king of Chosŏn, who received the heavenly mandate, had to prove from time to time that he was the right person to rule the land on behalf of heaven. This was especially true during times of political upheaval.

In 18th-century Chosŏn, the conflict between rival factions (*pungdang* 朋黨) often resulted in some factions denying the legitimacy of the throne. As a result, the political authority of the king was sometimes threatened. Under these circumstances, one of the effective tools for restoring the authority of the king was to present officialdom with a wondrous event that proved that the king was being helped by heaven.

In agrarian Chosŏn society, weather was very important. If there was an untimely drought or heavy rain, there was a high risk that the year's farming would fail, and the people's despair was likely to lead to dissatisfaction with the government. Although it is impossible for humans to control the rain, Chosŏn officials traditionally performed a state rite to pray for rain (*kiuje* 祈雨祭) and fair weather (*kich'ŏngje* 祈晴祭), to show a sincere belief that heaven could be moved and to soothe the hearts of the people. They had no choice but to accept wonder in order to appear to influence the weather (Lee 2000).

In the late Chosŏn period, it became common for the king to hold his own weather ritual. This was the case with King Yŏngjo 英祖 (r. 1724–1776), who ascended to the throne by overcoming a series of hardships. His hardships largely came from the conflicts between factions in the court. The conflicts were at times so intense that King Yŏngjo even had to deal with suspicions that he had poisoned his brother king, Kyŏngjong 景宗 (r. 1720–1724), to death in order to gain the throne. These suspicions led to a massive rebellion that took place at the beginning of his reign. There were those who doubted the legitimacy of his ascension to the throne. In this situation, the king tried to remove such serious conflicts between the factions through the so-called grand harmony policy (*t'angp'yŏngch'aek* 蕩平策), but he also tried to prove his own legitimacy by carrying out the rain ritual himself.

There were several cases of the king performing the rain ritual before King Yŏngjo, but he personally performed the ritual a total of 44 times during his reign (Kim 2005). Even considering his long reign, this is a very high number compared with that of the other kings. What did King Yŏngjo hope to achieve by performing the ritual?

In fact, the rain ritual was not necessarily performed by the king himself. In many cases, the king's official performed it on his behalf. But King Yŏngjo performed the ritual

himself quite a number of times. In particular, during the early years of his reign, he tried to create an image that the rain was falling thanks to his personal participation in the rituals. In the cases when it did not rain after the ritual, he would take the lead in pointing out flaws in the ritual that he had just engaged in and insist that the ritual be held again in a corrected form in another place. Indeed, on one occasion, Yǒngjo, after pushing for a new ritual despite opposition from his officials, even succeeded in making it rain. As if heaven was deeply moved by Yǒngjo's sincerity, there was enough rain falling to soak Yǒngjo's robes (Ha 2024).⁴ This indicates that there was a shared belief that the success of the rain ritual was expected to enhance the king's political authority. At the beginning of his reign, when his royal power was weak, Yǒngjo tried to strengthen his authority through this ritual, especially by performing it himself many times. The heaven-granting rain in response to his sincerity was a wonder that his government officials who had joined the ritual experienced collectively. This wonder was regarded as a testament to his authority. Through the rain ritual, King Yǒngjo proved himself to be the right person to rule the country who received the mandate from heaven.

Yǒngjo was also the king who restored the system of using the rain gauge (*ch'ŭgugi* 測雨器). This gauge was a scientific rain measurement device created during the time of King Sejong in the early Chosŏn period. King Yǒngjo revived this system, which was King Sejong's achievement, and followed the sacred system that had been implemented in the early period. This was an attempt to strengthen his power by presenting himself as the heir to the glory days of the Chosŏn dynasty. King Chǒngjo (1752–1800), Yǒngjo's grandson and successor to the throne, also utilized the same system of the rain gauge that King Yǒngjo had revived. In terms of the royal authority, the amount of rainfall measured by the gauge symbolized the amount of the king's virtue. The system was based on the provincial governors (*kwanch'alsa* 觀察使) in the eight provinces of Chosŏn who reported their rainfall measurements. However, King Chǒngjo sometimes expressed distrust of the reported rainfall. If the rainfall was large enough, it represented the king's high virtue and authority. Conversely, insufficient rainfall could lead to the conclusion that the king lacked virtue (Lim 2015).

The cases of rain rituals and the rain gauge illustrate the need for Chosŏn kings to utilize wonder to legitimize their authority. Even if the political system of the time was justified by Confucianism, the kings of Chosŏn had no other effective means of proving their authority as the supreme leader of the state, so they turned to wonder that seemed to fall outside of the Confucian scholarly system. This shows that the Confucian politics of Chosŏn had to rely on wonder. In fact, Neo-Confucianism leaned toward mysterious wonder from its very roots.

3. The Justification of the Ideological Basis

Neo-Confucianism generally refers to a new strand of Confucianism that emerged from the Song period. It advocated a new motto of transforming the world through individual moral action. Like Confucian scholars before them, Neo-Confucian scholars relied on ancient Confucian classics as the basis for their scholarship. However, these texts were very old and sometimes justified their content through mystical elements. One example is the *Zhouyi* (the *Book of Change* 周易).

The *Zhouyi* is one of the oldest classical texts in the Confucian tradition, but it is also a very abstruse text. It contains a series of divination charts that were allegedly created by ancient saints who understood the principles of the world, along with later interpretations of these charts. Thus, it can be said that the *Zhouyi* is a text that includes ancient worldviews. This book, like many other ancient texts, records superstitious beliefs. In particular, the shapes of its divination signs are derived from figures known as "Hetu" (Yellow River Diagram 河圖) and "Luoshu" (Luo River Writing 洛書). The process through which the ancient saints came to create them in the text is explained in a very wondrous way.

According to the story, it was Fuxi 伏羲, an ancient Chinese saint-king, who created Hetu. During his reign, a dragon horse appeared in the Yellow River. It is said that Fuxi

saw a pattern on the horse's back and created the Hetu diagram. A similar story is told about the creation of Luoshu. Another legendary king, Yu 禹 of the state Xia 夏, was the creator of Luoshu. In his time, a sacred turtle emerged from the Lou River. It is said that Yu saw the carapace of this sacred turtle and created the Luoshu writing.

Hetu and Loushu were created in an ancient time when the mystical understanding of nature was made. Thus, it was only natural that these mysterious stories were written down in classics: sacred kings, who received the heavenly mandate, created the figures and shapes that reflected the principles of the world. By looking at these images, people were able to understand the world and predict the fate of the nation. In other words, mystical or mysterious experiences justified the authority of the classics. Interestingly, this justification was maintained long after this period, even as people's understanding of nature deepened. The rich perception of the world contained in the Hetu and Loushu was constantly reinterpreted by later scholars. Scholars in the late Chosŏn dynasty also did not dispute the authority of these classical diagrams, which were born in this wondrous way.

In the late Chosŏn period, Learning of Images and Numbers (K. Sangsuhak, Ch. Xiangshu xue 象數學) that used the *Zhouyi* became rather popular (Cho 2007). This was a form of learning that understood the principle of the world through images and numbers with a belief that the images and numbers contain this principle. After the Manchurian invasions of the early 17th century that ended in Chosŏn's defeat, a group of scholars emerged in late Chosŏn who tried to explain the changes in the world based on this learning. Scholars of Chosŏn had to theoretically explain the reality that the barbarians (the Manchu) defeated a civilized country (Chosŏn) and even occupied China, which, in their view, was the root of Confucian civilization. They also had to maintain hope that one day, this upended reality would be corrected. What caught their eye was the Learning of Images and Numbers, which understood history as a cycle.

Scholars who were steeped in the Learning of Images and Numbers thought that there was a cycle of history, just like the cycle of images and numbers, and that one day, there would be a peaceful era in which civilization and barbarians were restored to their original position again. Suffice it to say, the way they used numbers was very far removed from modern math. As a matter of fact, in late Chosŏn, there was a growing understanding of mathematics and a better understanding of astronomy; however, the scholars who shared the knowledge of these fields were not suspicious of the wondrous elements in the classics. Rather, they used the ideological authority that comes from this primal wonder to assert the legitimacy of their plans to reform politics and society.

Yun Hyu 尹鑄 (1617–1680), a leading scholar of the 17th century, was deeply appreciative of the fact that the civilization of saints represented by Hetu and Luoshu had been transmitted to ancient Chosŏn or Ko Chosŏn, believed to be the first kingdom in Korean history.⁵ In particular, Yun argued that the numbers in Hetu and Luoshu were closely related to politics. He paid attention to "Hongfan" 洪範 of the *Shujing* (*Book of Documents* 書經), another of the ancient Confucian classics. Through a numerological analysis, he argued that Confucianism's rule was fundamental to the world's reasoning, such as the Hetu graffiti.⁶ The stories behind Hetu and Luoshu and their transmission to the ancient Korean kingdom were also historically unproven. However, Yun had no hesitation in believing this. He was very interested in reforming Chosŏn by reinterpreting the systems in the Confucian classics. The fact that a significant Confucian figure, *Kiji* (K. *Kija* 箕子), who presented "Hongfan", came to and ruled ancient Korea a long time ago could prove that the system Yun wanted to reinterpret could be utilized in a country far away from China. He wanted to build a firm foundation for his scholarly quest to make Chosŏn a better country in accord with the wonders of Hetu and Loushu. Yi Ik 李穡 (1681–1673 a scholar of the pragmatic form of learning, also praised that Hetu and Luoshu can only be explained by way of the heavenly harmony since they always correspond to the principle of the world. Yi then dismissed the scholars who did not believe the stories of Hetu and Luoshu as a person of shallow knowledge.⁷

The scholarly system of Neo-Confucianism was based on very ancient classics. These texts, including the *Zhouyi*, legitimized scholarly authority through the mystical experiences of individuals and states. Not many scholars, even including those with very advanced thinking at the time, questioned the legitimization of scholarly authority through wonder. Some scholars actually tried to emphasize the new scholarly authority through wonder.

Yi I 李珥 (1536–1884) was one of the leading scholars of Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn. The scholarly school that developed from him had a major influence even on the politics of the late Chosŏn dynasty. The school formed a political faction called “Sŏin” (Westerners 西人), which dominated late Chosŏn politics. However, a mysterious story regarding Yi’s birth was transmitted along the line of Yi’s scholarly descendants, i.e., that at the time of his birth, his mother, Saimdang 師任堂 (1504–1551), is said to have had a dream where a dragon appeared in front of her and handed her a child.⁸ This decorated the birth of not only the founder of their scholarly school but also a great scholar through a spiritual wonder. A similar story is told about Yi’s scholarly descendant, Song Siyŏl 宋時烈 (1607–1689), a leading politician of the 17th century. It is said that at the time of his birth, Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, appeared in his father’s dream, leading a group of disciples.⁹ This dream was included in the collection of Song’s writings. These precognitive dreams may seem like a cliché to commemorate the birth of a great figure. It may also be questioned whether the personal event of a dream can be accepted by many as a wonder that symbolizes academic authority. However, it is clear that these dreams were continuously passed down to Yi and Song’s scholarly descendants, who respected their masters and used these dreams to form their academic authority. Given the situation of the late Chosŏn period, these dreams must be understood as carrying more significance than merely serving as a literary device.

Neo-Confucian scholars in Chosŏn emphasized *tot’ong* (transmission of the way 道統) and gave greater importance to scholarly authority. Based on *tot’ong*, Neo-Confucian scholars asked the king to put Neo-Confucian ideology into practice. *Tot’ong* is a concept that refers to the transmission of the way in Confucianism. For Neo-Confucian scholars in Chosŏn, *tot’ong* was the great lineage of Confucianism from Confucius to the great scholars of Chosŏn, and it was distinguished from *wangt’ong* (transmission of the throne 王統), the lineage of the kings (Jung 2008). According to Neo-Confucian scholars, before Confucius, the two lineage traditions were one as the sage kings ruled. However, Confucius was a man who did not have royal status but established a firm scholarly authority. Therefore, Neo-Confucian scholars understood that the two traditions had been separated at the time of Confucius. From that point on, the scholarly authority moved away from the king and was maintained by the scholars outside the royal court. Late-Chosŏn scholars emphasized the lineage of the way and valued scholarly authority. They recognized that this scholarly authority could check the political authority of the king in the Neo-Confucian perspective, emphasizing that lineage from Confucian sages could confer significant scholarly authority, potentially surpassing even that of the king. Dreams that directly connected sages to the masters of Chosŏn could be taken as wonders that emphasized this scholarly authority.

As we have seen, Chosŏn kings utilized personal or collective wonder to emphasize their political authority. In this context, scholars also utilized wonder to legitimize their scholarly authority in order to challenge or check the royal authority. In other words, wonder was an important means to justify both political and scholarly authorities in the Chosŏn era. As the two authorities were recognized as the highest authorities by many people, it is noteworthy that the element of wonder was heavily utilized in the midst of the conflicts of these authorities, which we will now turn to.

4. The Conflict of Authorities and the Use of Wonder

In the preceding sections, we saw that wonder was crucial to the justification of authority in the Chosŏn period. Furthermore, there was not just one authority in power in this period, but a variety of authorities. Underlying each of these authorities was an ele-

ment of wonder, so it is worth examining how Confucian scholars utilized wonder when multiple authorities were in conflict with each other.

With the foundation of Chosŏn, Neo-Confucianism cemented its scholarly hegemony. As a result, Neo-Confucianism's system of thought was embraced by many scholars in Chosŏn, but not all of these scholars shared the same views. They were politically and ideologically divided into many different camps. The scholars of these different camps pursued the values they themselves cherished. However, some scholars at times had to work in environments they did not favor. They had to accept the reality of political authority that they considered unjust. In situations where it was difficult to criticize unjust political power directly, they used analogies to criticize power indirectly. Wonder was often found useful in such circumstances.

Neo-Confucian scholars recognized that the moral practice of individuals, in particular, is a shortcut to the reform of the world. Under this recognition, they took morality as a crucial value. As mentioned several times before, Chosŏn was founded on the Confucian system of thought, but its politics did not develop in a way that prioritized the practice of morality. In fact, in the early years of Chosŏn, politics often went in the opposite direction of morality. One case was the usurpation of the throne by King Sejo (r. 1455–1468).

Sejo was the seventh king of the Chosŏn dynasty. He was the second son of the fourth king, Sejong. After King Sejong died in 1450, King Munjong 文宗 (r. 1450–1452) succeeded him. Munjong was the first son of King Sejong and the older brother of King Sejo. He died of illness in 1452, shortly after ascending to the throne. His son, Tanjong 端宗 (r. 1452–1457), took over at the young age of 12. Ascending to the throne at such a young age, Tanjong had to rely on the help of the officials around him. The presence of his prominent uncles threatened his kingship, however. In particular, the would-be King Sejo was at odds with the high-ranking officials who had helped the young king, and in 1453, he purged them and seized power. He finally succeeded in usurping the throne from his young nephew king in 1455. After he rose to the throne, a few of the government officials objected to this injustice. They tried to overthrow him and restore Tanjong to the throne, but their efforts were unsuccessful. King Sejo had several leaders of this attempt executed and eventually had his nephew Tanjong killed as well. Through a series of events, King Sejo and his entourage gained total control of the royal court. From then on, the kingship of the Chosŏn dynasty was transmitted along the line of his descendants.

In later years, during the reign of King Sŏngjong 成宗 (r. 1469–1494), the ninth king of Chosŏn, a new group is said to have emerged in the political arena. This group is known as "Sarim" (lit. forest of scholars 士林). This new group opposed an established faction called the Hun'gu 勳舊, the old meritorious elites, understood in academia to have originated from King Sejo's entourage. The Sarim were characterized by a greater emphasis on morality than the Hungu (Choi 1996). Despite many criticisms (Kim 2003; Song 2017), still, the most widely known explanation for the politics of the early Chosŏn dynasty is probably this structure of confrontation between Hun'gu and Sarim. In this framework, the Sarim are described as a group that was more faithful to the ideology of Neo-Confucianism than the Hun'gu, who were seen as less moralistic and often more intellectually eclectic.

Although the Sarim entered the royal court with a descendant of Sejo as king, in their hearts, they were critical of King Sejo's usurpation of the throne. In other words, they were forced to serve a political power that they viewed as unjust. It was, however, difficult for them to publicly express their belief that King Sejo's usurpation of the throne was wrong. In this contradictory situation, the Sarim people employed wonders to reveal their moral assessment of the situation. The *Chŏ'ui chemun* 弔義帝文 (*Lament for the Rightful Emperor*) by Kim Chongjik 金宗直 (1431–1492) is a prominent example.

Kim was a key figure in the Sarim. He began his official career, after passing the civil service exam in 1459, during the reign of King Sejo. However, he was a man who emphasized faithfulness and became a leader of the Sarim (Kim 2022). It seems that Kim had always been very critical of King Sejo's usurpation of the throne. However, publicly

expressing his view would have been tantamount to treason at the time. Kim then decided to use his dream to reveal his assessment of King Sejo metaphorically.

In 1457, early in the reign of King Sejo, before Kim Chongjik began his career in the court, while traveling, he had a dream in which he met Chinese Emperor Yidi 義帝 (d. 206 BCE) of Chu 楚, an ancient Chinese historical figure who was crowned as emperor at the end of the Qin 秦 dynasty after Xiang Liang 項梁 and Xiang Wu 項羽 had re-established Chu. However, he was eventually killed by Xiang Wu, who then claimed to be king. In other words, he had been usurped and killed by a vassal long ago. After meeting him in a dream, Kim Chongjik wrote down his feelings about the dream in the *Choŭichemun*.¹⁰

In this writing, Kim pointed out that he and the emperor were very distant from each other in terms of time and space since he was a person of Chosŏn while the emperor was a person of Chinese Chu. Despite this temporal and special distance, Kim expressed his wonder at how strange it was that the emperor had appeared in his dream. Kim mourned the murder of the emperor, questioning how Xiang Wu had avoided the arrest and execution for his serious crime, as well as lamenting that heaven had not been in order at the time.¹¹

It may not seem unusual for someone to find their dream mysterious and write down their feelings about it. However, it was important to consider that the person Kim Chongjik had met in his dream was murdered and his throne was usurped by a vassal. This might imply that Kim criticized King Sejo for usurping his nephew's throne and causing his nephew's death. Even though it was written before he began his official life, the *Choŭichemun* was very likely to get him into trouble for criticizing the power of the day.

During Kim Chongjik's lifetime, the *Choŭichemun* did not become an issue, but after his death, it triggered great political upheaval when his disciple, Kim Ilson 金駟孫 (1464–1498), included the *Choŭichemun* in the country's official historical record. King Yŏnsan 燕山 (r. 1495–1506), known as a tyrant of the early Chosŏn, took issue with this inclusion by pointing out that the *Choŭichemun* was a criticism of King Sejo. Since he was a descendant of King Sejo, King Yŏnsan probably felt that criticizing Sejo would undermine his own legitimacy. As a result of the purge the king initiated subsequently, Kim Chongjik's disciples, including Kim Ilson, were put to death. Even though Kim Chongjik had already been dead at the time, his grave was dug up and his dead body was beheaded.¹²

A discussion of the historiography of the Hun'gu and the Sarim is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is worth pointing out that recent scholars have criticized earlier scholarship that has accepted uncritically the Sarim's own self-representation as a force for moral rectification (Wang 2023). In accord with such a perspective, this study also points out that the Sarim, far from being rigid Neo-Confucians, also made use of wonder to assert their authority. The *Choŭichemun* is a key example of this, as a writing that represented an individual's wondrous experience. In a situation where direct criticism of unjust power was not possible, the element of wonder was employed as a tool to make an indirect criticism and could thus express the moral views of Neo-Confucian scholars. It can be seen here that wonder was very closely linked to the political and ideological system of Neo-Confucianism.

Kim Chongjik and Kim Ilson were revered by later scholars as one of the root figures of the Sarim. Of course, there were debates about both of them, especially Kim Chongjik. Kim Chongjik criticized King Sejo by writing the *Choŭichemun*, even though he joined the royal court when King Sejo's descendant was the king. Therefore, there was also criticism of Kim Chongjik: "If Kim had a critical consciousness concerning King Sejo, why did he not refuse to work in the government office in the first place?" However, the fact that a small number of such criticisms were raised did not damage the symbolism of Kim Chongjik or his *Choŭichemun*. Rather, whenever there was a debate about Kim Chongjik, Kim Chongjik and his *Choŭichemun* were constantly mentioned in relation to the Sarim's identity. As a result, the *Choŭichemun* was recognized as a collective wonder that strengthened the Sarim's political identity, which emphasized morality, not just Kim's personal dream. Song Siyŏl, a famous scholar of late Chosŏn, pointed out that the *Choŭichemun* had great significance

in boosting the spirit of Neo-Confucian scholars,¹³ which highly praised Kim Chongjik for keeping his loyalty to King Tanjong, who had lost the throne to King Sejo.

5. Concluding Remarks

In the previous sections, we saw that wonder functioned as an integral component of the Chosŏn political and ideological system, but wonder was rarely examined in studies of Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn. Although there have been many studies on Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn, there is still a lack of understanding of how Chosŏn's system, based on Neo-Confucianism, really was.

In the Chosŏn dynasty, built upon Neo-Confucianism, wonder was an important element. In particular, it was essential for justifying political authority. T'aejo's foundation of Chosŏn was justified by the many wonders he had experienced. Based on wonder, Chosŏn scholars were able to emphasize that King T'aejo had received the mandate of heaven and that his foundation of Chosŏn was not treacherous. In the late Chosŏn period, wonder was also used to justify the king's authority. The image of the king controlling the weather through prayer was a way to solidify his royal authority during times of intense political tension. Neo-Confucianism turned out to be a system of thought that fundamentally relied on mystical stories. The unbelievable stories in the ancient Confucian classics actually served to strengthen the scholarly authority of the texts. Accepting this collective experience of wonder as having academic authority, scholars in the late Chosŏn period insisted on the legitimacy of their proposed reform policies. When emphasizing the scholarly authority of the scholars without a government post against the political authority of the king, Chosŏn Cheng-Zhu scholars utilized wonder.

In times of conflict between various authorities, wonder was also employed as a way to demonstrate one's cherished values. When protesting against unjust power, Neo-Confucian scholars relied on wonder in order to criticize power. In a situation where direct criticism could be dangerous, wonder provided an indirect way to criticize. Kim Chongjik's case of criticizing King Sejo's usurpation of the throne using a dream was not just interpreted as a simple act of expressing righteousness. His writing of the dream was respected by many Sarim scholars as a moral act of resisting the king's unjust authority; furthermore, it had a great influence on defining the Sarim's political identity. At various stages of politics, when there were conflicts of authority, wonder was invoked to legitimize authority.

Wonder was deeply rooted in the Chosŏn Neo-Confucian system. Through this wonder, we can see various layers of consciousness of Neo-Confucian scholars. The few examples discussed in this article are far from exhaustive of the perceptions of wonder among Chosŏn Confucian scholars, but these examples are selected from periods that were crucial to the formation of their collective identity. The foundation of Chosŏn by Yi Sŏnggye, the solidification of the royal power in late Chosŏn, the strengthening of scholarly authority in late Chosŏn, and the tension between Hun'gu and Sarim in early Chosŏn are all topics of great importance in the study of Chosŏn political and intellectual history. The fact that wonder was used at these important junctures is quite instrumental in understanding Chosŏn society. Exploring the use of the element of wonder in political and scholarly areas requires more than just looking at aspects that have been neglected. This task is meaningful in that it shows the multi-layers of Neo-Confucianism in the Chosŏn era. It also provides an opportunity to examine how Confucianism intersected with other religions of the time. This allowed Neo-Confucianism to be more closely aligned with the general views of Chosŏn society.

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Notes

- 1 “Yongbi öch’önga,” *Söngho sasöl* 15.
- 2 *Taejo sillok* 1 (these texts are included at the beginning of the *Taejo sillok* without any additional information such as date or title).
- 3 *Chosön kyönggukchön*, *Sambongjip* 13–14.
- 4 *Yöngjo sillok* 7, 7/24/1725 (first year of Yöngjo).
- 5 “Kiüi” 寄意, *Paekhojip* 2.
- 6 “Hongbömgyöng chönt’ongüi” 洪範經傳通義, *Paekho toksöki* 6.
- 7 “Sökkwi pinggwi” 石龜水龜, *Söngho sasöl* 5.
- 8 “Yulgok Yi sönsaeng kajang” 栗谷李先生家狀, *Sagye chönsö* 7.
- 9 “Yönbo” 年譜, *Sonja taejön* purok 2.
- 10 *Yönsan’gun ilgi* 30, 7/17, 1498 (fourth year of Yönsan’gun).
- 11 See Note 10 above.
- 12 See Note 10.
- 13 “Yö Kim Kichi” 與金起之, *Songja taejön* 53.

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