On the Construction Process of the Surname/Ancestral Seat Descent Groups in Korea as seen through Genealogies

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ABSTRACT

The uniform application in understanding the characteristics of Korean surname/ancestral seat descent groups of the current concept of 'clan' and 'lineage' when tracing descent from a common ancestor ignores their respective historical construction process. This paper highlights some misleading results of research based on such a uniform application and suggests that certain categories be used rather than one single concept to accommodate the highly particular and complicated construction process of Korean surname/ancestral descent groups.

Keywords: surname/ancestral seat descent groups, clan, lineage, genealogy, first ancestor, later prominent ancestor

Introduction

The surname/ancestral seat descent groups in Korea are known to comprise patrilineal kinsmen tracing their descent from one common first ancestor (sijo始祖). The immense importance descent groups have had in Korean society past and present has promoted ample surveys and research on them. Unfortunately some misconceptions regarding such descent groups continue to hamper research.

From a historical point of view, the most problematic understanding of the Korean surname/ancestral seat descent groups stems from ignoring the fact that these descent groups are the outcome of a historical process. This paper points out the problems such a misconception has caused in understanding the Korean surname/ancestral seat descent groups (sŏng'gwan chip'tan姓貫集團), and it illustrates the unique features of these descent groups by tracing the historical process of their construction.

Misconceptions about Korean Surname/Ancestral Seat Descent Groups

It is misleading to apply retrospectively such English terms as 'lineage' and 'clan' to the earlier forms of Korean surname/ancestral seat (hereafter S/A) descent groups based on later developments. John B. Duncan in his The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty for example fails to redefine the term 'lineage' when analyzing the central yangban descent groups that showed a great deal of continuity during the Koryŏ-Chosŏn dynastic transition.1
Duncan’s top ten S/A descent groups include the Hwangnyŏ Min (the Yŏhŭng Min), the Andong Kwŏn, the P'ap'yŏng Yun, the Munwha Yu, the Andong Kim, the Chŏnju Ch’oe, the Chuxsan Pak, the Kyŏngju Yi, the P’yŏngyang Cho, and the Ch’ŏngju Han. He treats each of these descent groups in the beginning of the dynasty as the established lineage they became in the later years of the dynasty, thus leading to a misunderstanding of their historical development.

According to Duncan, the Chŏnju Choe (全州 崔氏) lineage comprises segment A and segment B, each descending from Kyun (均, a civilian official prominent after the military coup of 1170) and Sunjak (純爵, a contemporaneous military officer) respectively (Duncan 2000, 131-32). But the two segments have separate first ancestors (sijo 始祖). Hence, they cannot be subsumed under a single lineage. Similarly, he sees two separate groups of the Andong Kim (安東 金氏) as one lineage (Duncan 2000, 128-27). Thus, the so called ‘old’ Andong Kim which produced a number of the highest munkwa (文科) examination passers in the early Chosŏn, and the ‘new’ Andong Kim which became politically prominent in the nineteenth century are recognized as one single lineage despite the fact that they worshiped separate first ancestors and thus do not fit the current concept of ‘lineage,’ tracing descent from a common first ancestor.

The Andong Kwŏn (安東 權氏) and the Kyŏngju Yi (慶州 李氏) are also recognized to have had two distinct segments respectively in the early Chosŏn (Duncan 2000, 122-24, 128-29). But, it was not until the later years of the dynasty that each segment came to have a sense of common ancestry through a common lineage founder. Segment B of the Andong Kwŏn as designated by Duncan is in fact the Chwayun kong branch line (佐尹公 派), which worshiped Chijŏng (至正) as a later prominent ancestor (chungsijo, 中始祖), and which appeared as the descendants of the Andong Kwŏn’s daughters in the first edition of the Andong Kwŏn genealogy (Sŏngwha po, 成化譜) published in 1476. Therefore, at the time of the genealogy compilation, this branch was not recognized as descendant from Haeng (享), the founder of the Andong Kwŏn. It was only in the 1794 genealogy (Hu kabin po, 後甲 毛譜) that this branch was incorporated into the lineage. The two segments A and B in the early Chosŏn as subsumed under a single lineage in later years did not share the same lineage consciousness as demonstrated in the later years of the dynasty. Similarly, the earliest extant genealogy of the Kŏngnju Yi compiled in 1684 lists segment B of Duncan’s account, without a mention of segment A. It was not until after the eighteenth century that both segments A and B were connected within this lineage.

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2 For the publication of the genealogies, see Miyajima Hiroshi, “Andong Kwŏn ssi sŏngwha po rul tonghaesŏ pon Hanguk chokpo ŭi kujojok t’ŭksŏng.” [Structural characteristics of Korean genealogy seen through the 1476 genealogy of the Andong Kwŏn] Daejong munhwa yŏnggu 62 (2008).

3 This genealogy is preserved at the National Library of Korea.