

The construction of heroes in Korean history: Why we need (to be careful with) historical narratives

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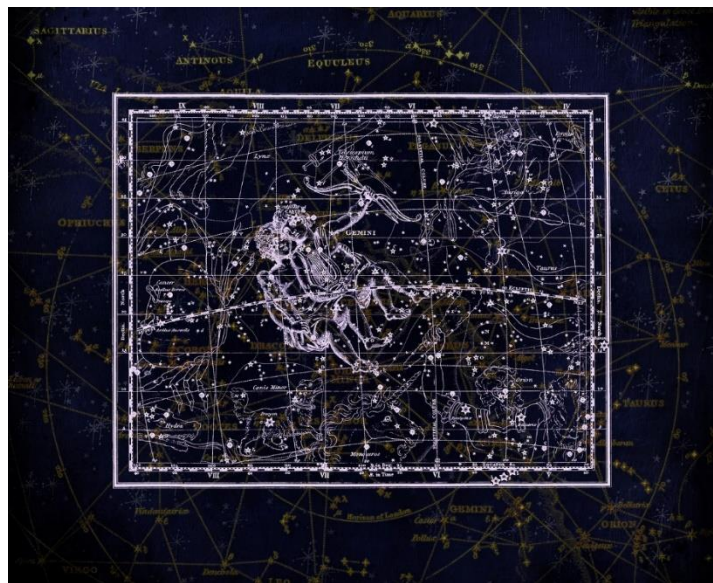


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On a dark night, over thousand stars are visible in the sky. Without any means of orientation, the sheer number of stars would overwhelm us. When facing overwhelming situations, we try to bring order into chaos by creating narratives based on our selected perception. In the case of the stars, for example, we rely on more or less officially acknowledged constellations that help us to tell one star from another. These constellations do not exist *per se*, but our imagination produces them. Since a constellation like the Gemini, for example, is much “catchier” than random groups of stars, we sometimes tend to forget the stars and are absorbed by the constellations. We create a narrative based on the stars we see, and then forget about the stars to remember only the narrative that we created.

We can find a similar process when it comes to historical data and narratives. The look into the past can be as overwhelming as the look into the sky. To bring order into the past we create historical narratives based on the historical data available. We could say that historical narratives are helpful to find orientation in the past as constellations are helpful to find orientation in the sky, but we should never forget that we are talking about narratives. Narratives do not exist *per se*; we construct them to make information perceivable. Thus, we can play with narratives, but must always be aware of the fact that they are not the one and only truth. Narratives are always told from a specific perspective and often follow certain agendas.

In his book *History on Film, Film on History* Robert Rosenstone reminds us that:

1. Data only becomes fact when inserted into a narrative.
2. The very form of narratives helps to shape and control what can be said about the past.
3. A subjective element inevitably is part of any so-called objective recounting of history.
4. Historical events can never be reconstructed as they really were but only constructed, as they may have been, which means that all claims that we can tell The Truth about the past are spurious. (Rosenstone 2012, xii)

Rosenstone argues that we always deal with subjective narratives when talking about the past and none of them represents the truth. Still we should not forget that the construction of historical narratives could have different motivations. Some historical narratives are told to reflect events in the past as truthful as possible, while others are constructed as a means to express a specific agenda. The historical narratives in this talk mainly belong to the second category. I will focus on narratives regarding heroes in Korean history that have a strong nationalistic agenda. In the first part I will briefly introduce three of the most popular heroes in Korean history, namely Tan'gun, King Sejong, and Admiral Yi Sunsin. The tragic hero Crown Prince Sado will be in the spotlight in the second half of this talk.

Tan'gun

The oldest hero narrative is devoted to Tan'gun who is said to be the ancestor of all Korean people. According to *Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)*, a collection of legends, folktales and historical narratives compiled by Ilyön in the 13th century, Tan'gun founded the first Korean state in 2333 BC. Tan'gun is said to be the son of a man descended from heaven and a bear that had become a woman. And October 3rd was chosen as the national holiday, called Kaech'önjöl 開天節, that commemorates Tan'gun's founding of Korea. Without being based on any reliable data, the Tan'gun foundation myth is ubiquitous in South and North Korea and reminds Koreans on their mythical common origin (Pai 2000, 57-96).

Sejong

Another hero in Korean history who is commemorated on a public holiday is King Sejong (1397-1450). Every October 9th King Sejong is celebrated as the alleged inventor of the Korean alphabet Han'gŭl in South Korea. In Söl Minsök's easy introduction to Korean history Sejong appears in a *manhwa* saying,

“Yes, you're right. I'm a born genius. That you can read and write is all because of me. I loved the people so much that I invented Han'gŭl. Only if the people become smarter, can the country prosper.” (Söl Minsök 2014, 66)

While Sejong is celebrated as the inventor of Han'gŭl, it is actually not clear who really invented it. Even Söl Minsök, who has strong nationalistic tendencies, expresses doubts,

while still trying to persuade his readers that Sejong is the best candidate. It actually does not matter who invented Han'gŭl. However, it is problematic to sell fiction as fact. This fiction as fact selling or fake facts can be dangerous because it can make the truth difficult to approach, which is especially true for the next hero, Yi Sunsin.

Yi Sunsin

Admiral Yi Sunsin (1545-98) is usually idolized for his actions during the Japanese invasions at the end of the 16th century. In the film *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Myŏngnyang, Kim Han-min 2014), which became the most successful film ever in South Korea, Yi Sunsin's idolization reaches a climax.



Yi Sun-sin's portrayal in *The Admiral*

In 2015 Yi Minung published a chapter on naval battles during the Japanese invasions. He explains that over 300 articles and over 150 books had been published on the Japanese invasions, but all of them tended to focus on Yi Sunsin. Yi adds,

The main problem is that they pay undue attention to the person of Yi Sunsin at the cost of ignoring the naval battles themselves. Undoubtedly a hero makes history, but history also makes a hero. It is my belief that a great man or woman is, after all, a creature of their historical circumstance. For this reason, research on Yi Sunsin cannot be done properly unless it is first grounded on a thorough historical analysis of the period. (Yi 2015, 120)

This means the frame through which Yi Sunsin is perceived as one of the greatest heroes in Korean history is so thick that it hinders scholars to do research on what actually happened. Here we can see how dangerous historical narratives can be. While we sometimes forget the stars while looking at constellations, we are often so absorbed by historical narratives that we ignore what actually happened.

Crown Prince Sado

I would like to start the second part of this talk with some pictures of the tile wall painting at the Ch'önggye- Stream in Seoul, which is said to be the longest tile wall painting in the world. It is 186 m long and 2.4 m high.



The beginning of the tile wall painting



One scene on the tile wall painting



Ch'ŏnggye-Stream and downtown Seoul. Photo by Robert Koehler

The Ch'ŏnggye-Stream can be found in downtown Seoul. And just imagine this center is decorated by a tile wall painting that measures almost 200 m. The location in addition to the huge dimensions of the tile wall painting itself gives meaning to it. What is depicted on the wall?



The explanations are titled: “Chŏngjo taewang nŭnhaeng panch’ado”. “Chŏngjo taewang” 正祖大王 refers to King Chŏngjo who reigned from 1776-1800. Chŏngjo is the son of Crown Prince Sado and the grandson of King Yŏngjo who reigned from 1724-1776. “Nŭnhaeng” (陵幸) is the royal visit to the grave of a king. And panch’ado 班次圖 is a picture of a royal procession that reflects in which order participants of a procession moved. That means, what we see on the tile wall is a painting of King Chŏngjo’s royal procession to the grave of a king. The explanations however say, “In 1795 King Chŏngjo visited the tomb of his father, Crown Prince Sado.” The problem is that Sado never became king, so why are the explanations titled “procession to the tomb of a king”?

Emergence of a colorful narrative

원행을묘정리의궤
園幸乙卯整理儀軌

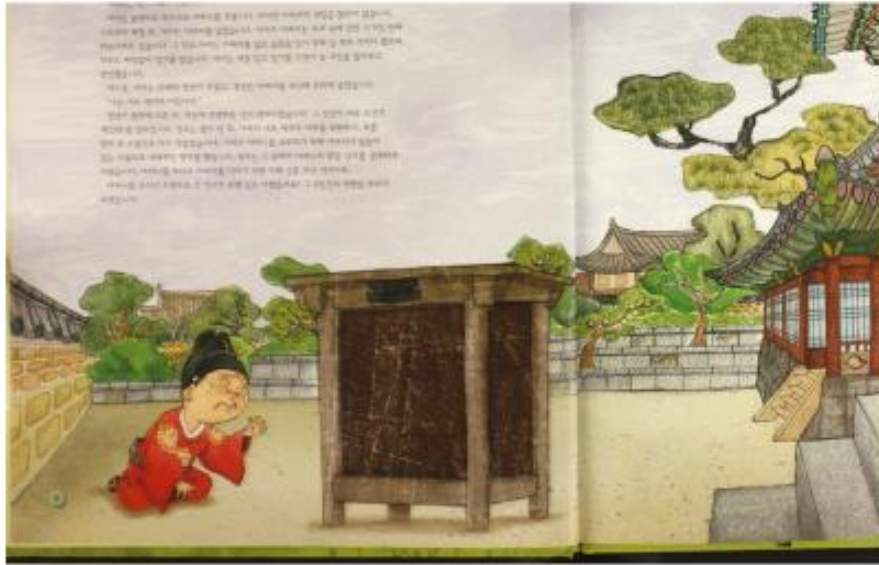


On this slide, we can see the source of the tile wall painting on the left; it is one page of the procession painting in the royal protocols, the so-called *Wŏnhaeng ūlmyo chŏngni ūgwe* 園幸乙卯整理儀軌. And on the right we see the corresponding part of the tile wall painting. The source is not titled “visit to the grave of a king (*nŭnghaeng*), but “visit to the grave of a crown prince (*wŏnhaeng*)”. In the center, there is the horse on which King Chŏngjo was supposed to ride during the procession. Of course, he himself is not depicted, since it was not allowed to paint the king, except for royal portraits. If we compare both pictures, what is the main difference? The tile wall painting is colored and can be understood as a symbol for the emergence of a colorful narrative concerning Crown Prince Sado.

I am interested in the life of narratives. Why do some narratives disappear, while others are retold repeatedly? What happens to narratives when they are told in different media? In this talk, I’m going to examine the life of a narrative that is extremely popular in Korea. Since this narrative revolves around a filicide, it stirs the emotions of every reader, listener or spectator. What might have happened when a father kills his only son? I am speaking about the narrative concerning Crown Prince Sado.

Prince Sado is a historical figure who lived in the middle of the 18th century. He was the son of King Yŏngjo and the father of King Chŏngjo. However, he himself never became a king, but died in a rice chest in 1762. This incident is of course fertile ground for all kinds of narratives. Most of the narratives tend to portray Sado as the pitiful Crown Prince as in the following examples.

Chǒngjo in front of the rice chest



Chǒngjo wa hamkŏke hamin 8 ilgan ŏi Hwasǒng haeŏngch'ŏ [The 8-day journey to Hwasǒng with King Chǒngjo]. Seoul: Kiriinbuk, 2014, p.8-9.

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The image above stems from a history book for children. It shows a child who is dressed in a royal robe and is crying in front of a box. Almost everybody who is familiar with Korean history or who has lived in Korea will immediately recognize the young Chǒngjo in this picture. The image of a young boy crying in front of a box is so powerful that it is immediately related to Sado's death in a rice chest. The young boy is crying in front of the rice chest in which his father Crown Prince Sado is dying. The Sado narrative cannot only be found in textbooks, but also in songs.



Sado Seja [Crown Prince Sado]

금이야 옥이야 태자로 봉한 몸이	The precious body of the Crown Prince
뒤안애 ㄹ는구나 불쌍한 사도세 자	dies in a rice chest. Pitiful Crown Prince Sado!

Myǒng Kuk-hwan. Sado Seja [Crown Prince Sado].
Composed by Na Hwa-rang. Melody by Kim Mun-
ŏng. Kayo mudae Myǒng Kuk-hwan Sūr'ŏ aelbǒm,
1992.

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This song stems from the late 1950s and is simply titled “Crown Prince Sado”. It describes Sado as the pitiful Crown Prince. Why was and, still, is Crown Prince Sado pitied so much in popular culture? What has happened? Crown Prince Sado's tragic death in a rice chest in 1762 is one of the most discussed incidents in Korean history. Interestingly, the pitiful image of Sado cannot only be found in popular culture, but also among some historians.

In the following, I will first give a short overview of the historical facts we know and introduce some statements of historians. I will then dive into the more fictional world to show

how the Sado narrative is portrayed in films and historical TV dramas. So, I will move from fact to fiction, while, as you will see, in some cases it is not quite clear how factual the facts are and how fictional the fiction is.

Robert Rosenstone writes in his book *History on Film, Film on History* that data only becomes fact when inserted into a narrative. I think this describes very well the interwovenness of fact and fiction we will encounter in this talk. At the end I will try to explain why the narrative of the pitiful Sado might be so popular.

Historical “facts”

The first source I would like to consult are the official annals, the *sillok*. On the day Crown Prince Sado had to enter the rice chest, we find the following entry.

After Prince Hyojang died, the king [Yǒngjo] had no son for a long time until the Crown Prince [Sado] was born. He [the Crown Prince] was extremely talented and the king loved him a lot. When the Crown Prince approached his teens he began to neglect his studies. And when he became regent his illness appeared and he lost his nature. Since it was not grave at the beginning, the ministers prayed for quick recovery. But after 1757 the symptoms of his illness became so severe that he killed palace women and eunuchs whenever he had an attack. Though, after his murders he always regretted his deeds. The King scolded him every time, but the Crown Prince’s illness only got worse out of anxiety...While the Crown Prince enjoyed his time with eunuchs and kisaeng losing any discipline, he even gave up visiting the king three times a day. The King was unhappy, but since he had no other sons, he used to worry about the dynasty. (Yǒngjo sillok, 1762.05 (yun).13)

According to the annals, Sado obviously suffered from attacks due to a mental illness that made him kill his servants. How do historians or scholars explain Sado’s death?

Chǒng Pyǒngsǒl, professor for Korean Literature at SNU, argues in his book *Power and Human Beings* that Sado was without doubt mentally ill, but that this illness was not the reason why his father Yǒngjo killed him (Chǒng 2015, 7). He claims that it was rather the fact that Sado tried to kill his father, that he committed treason that forced the king to kill his son. On the other hand, Han Yǒngu, a former professor for Korean history at SNU, holds political conflicts responsible for Sado’s death (Han 2013, 77). He argues that the political faction of the *noron*, or the Old Doctrine, persuaded Yǒngjo to get rid of his son. Yǒngjo is said to have supported the Old Doctrine, while Sado opposed them. There are even more extreme standpoints according to which Sado’s mental illness is said to be simply made up to have a reason to get rid of him.

Donald Baker, an authority in the field of Korean history, wrote in a review on Yi In-hwa’s *Yǒngwǒnhan cheguk* [Everlasting Empire],

Sado suffered from a mental disease that made him unsuitable for such a responsibility. In fact, he was so unsuitable that, since he was Yongjo’s only

surviving son, his survival threatened the survival of the dynasty itself. He began to engage in behavior that was not tolerated even in a king, including random acts of murder. Such behavior by a leading member of the royal family undermined the aura of virtue which the royal family needed in order to rule over the Confucian government of Korea. In order to save the royal family claim to the Choson throne, in 1762 King Yongjo ordered his son, Crown Prince Sado, sealed into a rice chest to die of dehydration. (Yi 2014, 375-383)

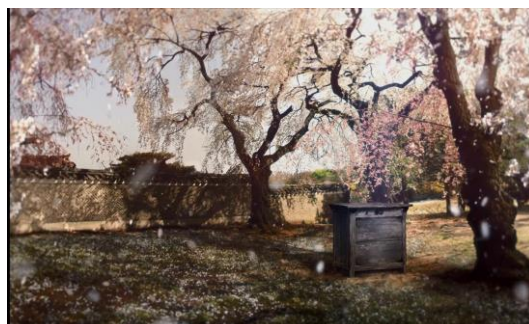
This position can also be found in most standard works for Korean history in English. It is interesting to see how different the perspectives are in the Korean academic world. It is not my aim to judge how reasonable each standpoint is, but I would like to point to the fact that it is especially the extreme standpoint according to which Sado was not guilty and just the victim of political conflicts that was absorbed in popular culture. In the following we will see that Sado is not portrayed as cruel murderer, but as pitiful victim. Even if he kills somebody, he does not seem to be responsible for these murders.

Sado on screen



Here we can see a screen shot of the rice chest in the film *The Throne* (Sado, Lee Joon-ik 2015). The film is said to be based on Chŏng Pyŏng-sŏl's portrayal of Sado's death and therefore relatively realistic. We saw the same scene in the children's book some slides ago. When we look at the small boy crying in front of the rice chest, in which his father is dying, we feel sympathy with the boy and want to help even if we do not know why the father is in the rice chest.

In the KBS-documentary *Uigwe, the 8-day festival* (Choi Pil-gon, 2014) the rice chest is shown without little Chŏngjo, but extremely romanticized surrounded by cherry blossoms.



While the film *The Throne* clearly portrays Sado as mentally ill, it still blames Yǒngjo for being responsible for this disease by having been too harsh to his son. We see how Sado kills the servant who tries to help him with his robe. Sado is said to have suffered from vestiphobia, a fear of clothing. In the film *The Throne* only one murder is shown although Sado is said to have killed more than a hundred people. Sado is not portrayed as perpetrator, but as pathetic victim. The director even referred to this film as an example for what happens if parents force their kids to study too much.

While the film *The Throne* portrays Sado as mentally ill, but makes Yǒngjo responsible for his son's disease, the historical drama *Secret Door* glorifies Sado in another way. Here, not only the circumstances of his death are romanticized, but he himself appears as the ideal leader who stands up for the needs of his people. In one scene we see how a minister comes to visit Sado who wants to give everybody the chance to participate in the civil exams. At first, everybody, including the king and all ministers oppose, but then one minister appears to support the "crazily" progressive prince Sado. The minister in this scene says that the whole world will think Sado to be crazy because of his plan to open the civil exams to everybody, but he adds that he would like to become crazy together with Sado. Here, the craziness does not refer to a mental illness, but to Sado's progressiveness. He is extremely or better "crazily" progressive.

Conclusion

Let us return once more to the tile wall painting. Although there might be different points of view concerning the reasons for Sado's execution, according to historical facts it seems to be quite clear that Sado was a murderer. That means the almost 200 m long tile wall painting in the very center of Seoul actually depicts the royal procession to the grave of a murderer who is referred to as a king.

Sado's forced death was a heavy burden for King Chǒngjo, not only as Sado's son, but also as Yǒngjo's successor to the throne. Chǒngjo was torn between his wish to commemorate his father and the duty to protect the moral authority of the Yi royal house. In order to honor his father he visited the tomb in 1795. It can be said that the romanticization regarding Sado's death started with Chǒngjo's reign and is still going on in Korean popular culture, and the tile wall painting seems to be part of this movement. Why do the explanations call Sado's grave the grave of a king? Why do we still need this kind of romanticization of Sado? Chǒngjo had to romanticize the circumstances of Sado's death to legitimate himself as a king. As a king it was easier being a son of a victim than being the son of a murderer. But why is Sado still romanticized? Are the political struggles of the 18th century still going on? Or did Sado become the symbol of a fighter against the political establishment? Somebody who is so "crazy" as to question the power of established political groups? In other words, a hero of the ordinary people who suffer from those above in power?

I end with these questions and come back to constellations once more. If we understand the stars as the data we have regarding Korean history, constellations are the narratives that help us to find orientation in the past. Narratives regarding historical heroes help us to make sense of the past. We should all be familiar with them because they are a part of Korean culture. Shared stories mirror the imagined worlds in which people pass their daily lives. To understand people we also have to understand the stories they live with. But we should never forget that these stories are fiction and do not tell the one and only truth.

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