

# A Brief Account of Researches on Ancient Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in South Korea in Recent Years

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**Abstract:** The study of calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient times has always been the focus of Korean scholars. In recent years, two monographs have been published, together with 14 academic dissertations (including 11 masters' theses and 3 doctoral dissertations) and 37 periodical theses. They cover research fields of the totality of calamities and abnormal phenomena, the relationship between calamities and abnormal phenomena with politics, the thoughts on calamities and abnormal phenomena, as well as representative figures and books on that topic. This paper briefly summarizes and analyzes these researches on ancient calamities and abnormal phenomena in South Korea in this period, in order to provide some reference for domestic research in that field.

## 1. Introduction

The word “zhaiyi” in Chinese is the combination of “zhai” and “yi”. “Zhai” generally refers to natural disasters and calamities, like earthquakes, fires, floods, droughts, pestilence, and so on. “Yi” usually refers to abnormal supernatural phenomena or rare natural phenomena, such as star change and abnormal climate. Ancient Korea attached great importance to the phenomenon of “zhaiyi” and left a lot of detailed and valuable documents.

In recent years, Korean scholars focus on the research of calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient times. A large number of scholars have emerged in that field and made remarkable achievements. According to incomplete statistics, in recent years, two monographs have been published, together with 14 academic dissertations (including 11 masters' theses and 3 doctoral dissertations) and 37 periodical theses. They cover research fields of the totality of calamities and abnormal phenomena, the relationship between calamities and abnormal phenomena with politics, the thoughts on these calamities and abnormal phenomena, as well as representative figures and books on that topic. This paper briefly summarizes and analyzes these researches on ancient calamities and abnormal phenomena in South Korea in this period, in order to provide some reference for the domestic research in that field.

## 2. Research Overview

### 2.1 Research on the Totality of Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Ancient Korea

Heran Li wrote *Case Study on the History of the Correlation Between Abnormal Astronomical Phenomena and Calamities -- Centred on Solar Eclipse and Comet*. [1] Based on historical facts, this paper investigates abnormal astronomical phenomena by scientific methods. The correlation between solar eclipse, the appearance of comets and disasters is analyzed.

Geji Song wrote *Conventions and Rhetoric in Memorials to the Throne Related to Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena*. [2] It mainly investigates, how to use rhetorical devices that are usually seen in common prose in memorials to the throne.

Xinglai Park published *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Politics in the Early Days of Korea*. [3] The paper holds that calamities and abnormal phenomena are the mirror; they reflect the god's judgment on the political gains and losses of rulers. The record of calamity in the early stage of Korea is an important factor which influenced the balance of power between kings and their

ministers. In 1986, he published *Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Baekje*, [4] which is written based on *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*. In 1998, he published his monograph, *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Politics in Korean History*. [5] Based on *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*, *The History of Koryo* and *The Record of Joseon Dynasty*, he studied catastrophes in different stages of Korean history.

## **2.2 Research on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Ancient Times of Baekje**

Yongxuan Jin wrote *Investigation on the View of Baekje Society on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena*. [6] This paper explores the influence of Baekje's view of calamities and abnormal phenomena on political figures' policy decisions and how it is related to northern culture through three aspects: the origin and spread of the five elements, calamities and abnormal phenomena in Baekje society and the view of political thought in light of the view on calamities and abnormal phenomena.

## **2.3 Research on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Ancient Times of Silla**

Jifeng Li is an active and outstanding scholar in the study of calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient times of Silla. He wrote his doctoral thesis on this topic, and published a series of papers on disasters in Silla. His doctoral thesis is *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena as well as Political and Social Changes in the Era of Unified Silla*. [7] He points out that in the later period of Silla, the state power failed to deal with calamities and abnormal phenomena effectively. The independence of the rich class was strengthened, which led to peasant rebellion and social chaos. The collapse of Silla was directly or indirectly related to calamities and abnormal phenomena.

In 2011, he published *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Confucian Politics in the Era of King Seongdeok of Silla*. [8] He inspected the relation between calamities, abnormal phenomena and political thoughts, reviewed the concept on calamities and abnormal phenomena, and studied the state's policies in coping with disasters, such as tax relief, loan relief and amnesty.

In 2012, he published *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Changes in Political Society in the Era of King Wonseong of Silla*, [9] pointing out that during the reign on King Wonseong, the frequency of disasters was the highest. The occurrence of thieves and rebellion were all caused by calamities and abnormal phenomena, which was a portrayal of social unrest. It also really promoted the king to centralize his power and centred on his own duty.

In the same year, he published *Political Situation as well as Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in the Era of King Gyeongmun of Silla*, [10] which pointed out that King Gyeongmun expanded the support base and implemented measures to strengthen the royal power in the early stage of his reign. In the late period of his reign, when the disaster continued, he continued to promote large-scale construction projects, which caused social dissatisfaction. It can be seen that calamities in this period were closely related to political and social changes.

In 2016, he published *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena as well as Political and Social Impacts During the Reign of King Hsien-Te and King Heungdeok of Silla*. [11] The article pointed out that there were positive and negative responses to disasters. Positive responses included measures such as building dams; negative responses included relief, holding ceremonies and exoneration. Methods coping with calamities and abnormal phenomena have certain impacts on the political and social changes in this period.

In the same year, he also published *Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Peasant Rebellion During the Reign of Queen Heongang of Silla*. [12] The article starts from the background of peasant rebellion in the time of Queen Heongang, and expands his vision to measures response to calamities and catastrophes. The peasant rebellion was caused by political, social and economic contradictions in the late period of Silla. During the reign of Queen Heongang, the peasant rebellion directly led to the division of Silla society.

In 2018, he published *Recommendation System as well as Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena During the Reign of King Huay-Kwang of Silla*. [13] The article holds that the recommendation system was implemented by the king's order; talented local officials were selected through this system to expand their support base. As a response to disasters and social changes, recommendation

became an important training channel for local officials in the later period of Silla.

## **2.4 Research on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Ancient Times of Koryo**

Yingri Chen published monograph, *The King of Koryo and the Thought of Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena*, [14] which is written based on themes selected by the author in the process of reading the *History of Koryo* as well as four papers with “calamities and abnormal phenomena” as the centre written by the research group. The book discusses the topic from aspects of calamities and abnormal phenomena, the character of Confucian theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena, as well as the separation of punishment and politics with the society.

Zhengxiu Han's paper, *Natural Disasters and the Confucianism Political Thought in the Early Days of Korea*, [15] explores the relationship between natural calamities and abnormal phenomena with Confucianism politics. This paper holds that Zhongshu Dong's theory of heaven-human induction is the basis of Koryo's thought on calamities and abnormal phenomena, which is also the background of Confucianism's political thought.

Zhenghao Li wrote *View of Calamity and Crisis Through the Records of Abnormal Phenomena in the Early Period of Koryo -- Focusing on Records of Five Elements in the History of Koryo*. [16] The paper holds that people at that time understood catastrophes as the relation to human social operation, and regarded natural disasters, abnormal phenomena and human behaviors as a part of nature. They understood calamities and abnormal phenomena from the organic whole of the nature.

Minyu Li published *The Development of Primary Science Education Materials Through Records of Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in Koryo Era*. [17] Through the excavation and collation of related records on calamities, abnormal phenomena and climate changes in the early Koryo period, useful records are sorted out as basic materials for primary science education and specific materials for theme education.

## **2.5 Research on Ancient Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena in the Joseon Dynasty**

### **2.5.1 Research on the Relationship between Calamities, Abnormal Phenomena and Politics**

Xianghu Li wrote *Characteristics of the View on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena During the Reign of Chengzong in Records of the Joseon Dynasty*. [18] He focuses on records of calamities and abnormal phenomena in *Records of Chengzong*. The paper analyzes calamities and abnormal phenomena during the Chengzong period and people's understanding on these phenomena, as well as corresponding measures in that period and characteristics. In 2013, he published *Confucian Thinking of Coping with Drought in Taizong - Centering on Records of Drought and Related Events as well as the Thought on Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in Records of Taizong*. [19] The paper investigates droughts and coping measures during the reign of Taizong, as well as the Confucian thinking reflected in that process: Zhuzi's view on calamities and abnormal phenomena.

In Shuzheng Xia's *Understanding and Response to Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena During the Reign Renzu*, [20] records of calamities and abnormal phenomena during the reign of Renzu are analyzed. The paper holds that there are different understandings and responses during this period. In the early stage of Renzu's reign, people continued the traditional theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena. In the later stage, positive responses occurred with “earth change” as the centre. On the basis of this master's thesis, he published the article, *Understanding and Response to Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena During the Reign Renzu*. [21]

In 2019, he also published the article, *Political Situation Changes in the Reign of Emperor Xiaozong and the Flexible Use of Argument on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena*. [22] The article pointed out that Xiaozong responded to disasters positively, and he often asked ministers to put forward suggestions. He also took part in the pray for rain by person. At that time, arguments on calamities and abnormal phenomena were very active.

### **2.5.2 Research on the Theory of Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena**

Shengcan Park published *View on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena and Politics in the Early Days of Korea*. [23] This paper points out that in the early period of Korea, the view on

calamities and abnormal phenomena turned from Confucianism theory of Han and Tang Dynasties to Neo-Confucianism. The corresponding measures also showed different characteristics. The Han and Tang Confucianism theory dominated the view on calamities and abnormal phenomena during the reign of Taizu and Taizong; then the idea was related to agricultural administration in the period of Shizong, and Buddhism in the period of Shizu. During the reign of Chengzong, Neo Confucianism theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena established.

### 2.5.3 Research on Representative Characters in Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena Study

Zhenglin Li published *Classification of Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena by Yi Li and Rationalization of his Theory on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena*. [24] The paper holds, after Yi Li understood traditional calamities and abnormal phenomena, he analyzed and classified them in a unique way on the basis of the cause and attribute of calamities and abnormal phenomena. His theory was deeply influenced by fatalism and Western science.

Zhengyan Cui wrote the paper, *Two Sides and Practice of Yi Li's Theory on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena -- Centring on the Works of Yi Li*. [25] The article points out that Li's theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena includes the view of natural calamity and damnation calamity. As the core of his theory, Jingshi idea and Xinxing idea are the two major supports of his theory of practice.

Yu Li wrote, *Mu Xu's View of Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena - Centering on Corresponding Sacrificial Rites*. [26] This paper holds that Xu's understanding of calamities was centred on the concepts of Qi, Yin and Yang, and the interaction between heaven and man. Calamities and abnormal phenomena are related to knowledge and political activities. There are three types of sacrificial rites corresponding to calamity and abnormal phenomena: the ritual of tracing the origin, the ritual of relieving resentment and the ritual of dispelling evil spirits.

Donglin Li's master thesis *Mu Xu's Paleology in the 17th Century and the Chunqiu Theory of Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena* [27] studies Xu's paleology and Chunqiu theory on calamity and abnormal phenomena. In 2003, he published *The "Sinological" Tendency of Mu Xu's Chunqiu Theory of Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena*. [28] The article holds that calamities and abnormal phenomena are not purely natural disasters, but the will of heaven. They make rulers introspected themselves.

### 2.5.4 Research on Representative Books on Calamities and Abnormal Phenomena

Shixian Jing, a Korean scholar, is an outstanding researcher in studying representative books on calamities and abnormal phenomena in the Joseon Dynasty. Most of his journal papers focus on this field; his master's and doctoral dissertations are also related to this research topic. From 2012 to 2018, he published a paper on this issue every year.

In 2012, he published his master's thesis, *Astronomical Records and the View on Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in the 16th Century: Re-understanding of Astronomical Records in Records of the Joseon Dynasty*. [29] The article re-evaluates astronomical records and the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena in *Records of the Joseon Dynasty* from three aspects: the characteristics of calamities and abnormal phenomena in astronomical records, the two sides of the view on calamities and abnormal phenomena, and the activation of the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena.

In 2013, he published the *Re-understanding of Disaster Records in Records of the Joseon Dynasty - Centring the Political and Ideological Functions of the View on Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in the 16th Century*. [30] He believed that records in this book were political materials after selection, rather than objective and scientific materials without omission. When the calamity happens, the king should ask for the forgiveness of the heaven.

In 2014, he published *Review on Records of Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in the 17th Century (from the Period of Renzu to the Period of Xianzong) - Centring on Donggong Diaries*. [31] This paper believes that weather records are subjective. Observation records in *Donggong Diaries* are "man-made choices" on natural phenomena.

In 2015, he published *Natural Record and Significance of Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena*

in the 17th Century. [32] The article analyzes the content of *Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena* and studies its significance in the history of political thought. The author thinks that the book is not a collection of records on natural phenomena in the 17th century, but a projection of the history. It can be used to investigate the views of intellectuals on calamities and their understanding of nature at that time.

In 2016, he published *Research on Records and Views on Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in Literature Document (Xiangwei Kao) of the Second Half of the 18th Century*. [33] This paper reviews and analyzes views on calamity and abnormal phenomena of Haoxiu Xu and Wanyun Li through analyzing *Literature Document (Xiangwei Kao)*. The article holds that Xu's view is the natural cognition based on Western science. Li's view belongs to the traditional theory of the interaction between heaven and man. The difference is caused by their different views on nature and knowledge.

In 2017, he published *The Rise of Zhuzi's Theory on Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in the Second Half of the 15th Century* [34] to investigate Zhuzi's political theory and explore its political and ideological significance. It is believed that the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena can guarantee the safety of Zhuzi's political theory. Therefore, in the latter half of the 15th century, scholars paid attention to the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena in order to realize the political theory of Zhuzi.

In 2018, he published his doctoral dissertation, *Changes in the Theory of n Calamity and Abnormal Phenomena in the Later Period of Korea: Centred on Theoretical System and Political Function*. [35] This paper discusses the rise and development of Zhuzi's theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena in the late period of Korea, as well as political and ideological changes corresponding to the theory. It also discusses the multilateralization of the theory from these aspects: the reinterpretation of the theory of interaction between heaven and man, the acceptance of Western astronomy and the re compilation of the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena, as well as the natural cognition of practical science and the theory on calamities and abnormal phenomena.

### 3. Brief Comments

During this period, the following two characteristics were found from the study on calamities and abnormal phenomena in South Korea.

First, the research method follows the study of ancient Chinese disaster. Many scholars inspect and analyze from the perspective of micro view. When narrating, they tend to examine the whole from different parts, and analyze the whole through the explanation of specific issues. In terms of content, they focus on studying the relationship between calamities, abnormal phenomena and politics, ancient thought on calamities and abnormal phenomena and other aspects. Generally speaking, the perspective of research papers in this period is relatively narrow, but there are also many papers with more unique perspectives. These papers not only comprehensively and correctly describe disasters in ancient Korea, but also adopt new concepts such as comparative theory to explain these calamities and abnormal phenomena.

Second, the comparative study between Chinese and Korean thoughts on calamities and abnormal phenomena, between Chinese and Korean scholars, and between Chinese and Korean works has attracted more attention. When Korean scholars studied ancient Chinese thoughts on calamities and abnormal phenomena, they considered how to connect the ideas with calamities and abnormal phenomena in their own country. In this regard, Korean scholars have long planned to take the inheritance and development of ancient Korean disasters on Chinese disaster culture as the research focus. In recent years, the research of calamities and abnormal phenomena in South Korea has inherited this academic research tradition. For example, it is very innovative to study the similarities and differences between calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient times in China and South Korea, and to use the comparative theory of China and the west to analyze and explain disasters concretely.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although in this period, Korean scholars have made a lot of research results, we should also be aware that there are still some deficiencies. First of all, according to dynasties, there are 31 articles on Joseon Dynasty, 11 articles on Silla, and no research on Koguryo. It can be seen that the study of calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient Korea mainly focuses on the Joseon Dynasty. The research on calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient times before the Joseon Dynasty is obviously insufficient. Secondly, future study should make a comprehensive and detailed analysis of literature related to calamities and catastrophes in ancient Korea, so as to form a systematic context for the study and provide a clear direction. Thirdly, in the research perspective, a variety of views should be formed. Both micro and macro perspectives are needed in order to understand calamities and abnormal phenomena more comprehensively. With the continuous expansion of the research scope and the diversity of research methods, we can find many new results that have not yet been explored. New results with important academic values, far-reaching significance and international influence will further promote the development of disaster research in South Korea. Finally, we should pay attention to the academic research on traditional theories of calamities and abnormal phenomena in ancient works.

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