13. DID FAKE GENEALOGIES EXIST?

Jung Jin Young

In South Korea, almost every household these days has a family genealogy (*jokbo*). It can answer many of the questions a person may have about his or her family history. Genealogies from the Joseon period contained information about the career and lives of members of a clan beginning with the progenitor. For each individual, they recorded the name, the style, pen name, results of the civil service exam, government positions, notable achievements, date of birth, date of death, and the location of the grave. They also noted whether an individual had children and whether they were legitimate, distinguishing legitimate children from the offspring of concubines as well as sons from sons-in-law. People can use them to learn about their progenitors, the descendants of those progenitors, and their accomplishments. They feel pride at having eminent ancestors who achieved great deeds and enjoyed wealth and fame. Sometimes, they can find the name of a historical figure whom they read about in their school textbooks. People may even discover that they are the descendant of the royal family of Silla or of a famous figure from the Goryeo period. In some cases, they find out surprising facts; there are even some families whose ancestors are of Chinese origin.

Though most people trust the accuracy of Joseon-era genealogies, there are many aspects of them that are suspicious. If all the information they contain were true, then our ancestors must have lived in a strange world where the only people were a few thousand nobles and members of royal families. During the Silla and Goryeo periods, there were far more peasants than nobles, and those commoners must have had descendants. Furthermore, Koreans regard themselves as a homogeneous race who are the descendants of Dangun, but there are clans whose progenitor came from China. It is impossible to deny that genealogies are not completely accurate. Records in a genealogy could have been fabricated without any basis in historical fact. But even if all the information in a genealogy were correct, it is possible that a member of the clan is not a blood relation of the putative progenitor. This chapter examines the basic features of genealogies and discusses how they changed from the early to the late Joseon period, including the emergence of fake genealogies.
The Creation of Genealogies

Family genealogies became more common during the Joseon period. In the Goryeo era, there were similar documents such as the ssijok (family tree), segyedo (societal map), gacheop (family book) in addition to the jokdo (lineage map). Information about the royal family, members of the nobility, merit subjects, and children of high-level government officials were recorded in these documents to verify the succession of family lineage. The need for a more proper genealogy emerged with the gradual spread of Neo-Confucianism during the early Joseon period. The royal family began to compile systematic genealogies before private families did. At the beginning of the dynasty, it did not make distinctions among its many wives, concubines, and their children. There was frequent infighting among them over their lineages and the distribution of power. Taejong, who became king after two successive conflicts over the throne, believed that it was necessary to establish a strict hierarchy within the royal family. This was the reason that the royal family compiled a genealogy. Some of the first genealogies of the royal family were the Seonwonnok and jongchinnok from Taejong’s reign, as well as the Dangdaeseonwonnok from Sejong’s reign. A genealogy established clear lines of pedigree and distinguished wives from concubines as well as legitimate children from illegitimate ones.

Yangban sadaebu families were in a similar situation to the royal household, though to a lesser degree. For private households, the compilation of genealogies became widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after the printing of the Andong Gwon family’s Seonghwabo in 1476. During the Joseon period, having a genealogy in itself was a sign of belonging to the yangban class. Genealogies were also meant to facilitate ancestor worship which, for the yangban class, helped to maintain their social and political position. Through genealogies, the yangban class was able to strengthen the unity of their bloodlines and emphasize their differences with other classes. As is well known, the yangban were the elites who enjoyed power and privilege, while commoners and the lower classes were disadvantaged socially and economically. Every member of the lower class wanted to become a yangban, and one way to achieve such status was to obtain a genealogy. Thus, the use of genealogies became even more widespread in the late Joseon period.

There were many different kinds of genealogies in the Joseon period. Since they recorded the family lineage from a specific clan progenitor to the present day, they have also been called sebo (lineage records).