THE COUNTY MAGISTRATE IN YI KOREA:

A Silhouette

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Anyone who works for a long time with a large mass of data will have in his mind a kaleidoscope of impressions. In areas central to the goals of the research some of these impressions will undergo substantiation and begin a new existence as hypotheses; if not, then they will flicker and die. In fringe areas, however, such impressions may well continue to flit about in insubstantial form, now and then tantalizing their creator – or should I say 'host'? –- with the constant promise of imminent revelation. The condign fate of this sort of impressions is to be subjected to the spotlight glare its very tangency hitherto has spared it.

In the plodding course of a decade of data grubbing on the products of the Yi Dynasty civil service examination system, I of course have met the County Magistrate on numberless occasions. But since our acquaintance, till now, had not really ripened, my impressions of him inevitably were, to repeat, kaleidoscopic. And yet I did not hesitate to deliver myself of these impressions from time to time in an unprofessionally positive way. Specifically, I though I knew at least three rather interesting, even important, things about the County Magistrate. The first is that he often was appointed to a county close to his own county of residence, although surely never to his own county. Sometimes this would be in humane response to his expressed desire to return home, in actuality close to home, to better nurture an aged parent or two. More often, I surmised, the aspirant to such a post had solid lineage ties in the county near home he was named to head and his appointment would promote the interests of his lineage and of himself.

A second characteristic of the County Magistrate appointment system surely was that the term in office tended to become markedly shorter as the dynasty aged. This could be easily understood as a reflection of factional disputation in the century or so after the Japanese invasion of 1592-98. And it was a particularly natural consequence of the dominant role played by so-called sedo (in-law) politics in the dismal, declining nineteenth century.

Thirdly, although originally the province of the civil examination holder, in the latter half of the dynasty these local appointment plums went more and more to military men. Initial contemplation found this particular proposition difficult to

rationalize. After all, a stint outside the capital was an absolute prerequisite for advancement beyond the middle ranks in the central bureaucracy. Moreover, the number of civil degrees awarded annually was a figure constantly, if slowly, on the rise, thus presumably assuring an over-supply of magistrates for the constant number of county jurisdictions. And was it not also the case that the claim to preferment of civil degree holder outweighed, ever more heavily, that of his disdained military examination counterpart?

A fourth generalization perhaps should e added, one that emerges rather from that basic set of postulates shared (I suspect) by most students of Korean history. Whatever the dynamics of the County Magistrate system during the first four centuries or so of the Yi Dynasty, it certainly must be branded a failure at the end. For it was there on the visible, tangible local level that the loyalties of the people were lost to alien ideology and native rabble rouser. It was the lecherous County Magistrate who cast the fair Chunhyang-i into durance vile. It was the venal County Magistrate who emptied the public granaries into his own pockets. It was the rapacious County Magistrate who extorted double the legal levies from the groaning peasantry. And it was the cowardly County Magistrate who first took to his heels when the populace rose in righteous revolt.

I had no serious thought of testing any of these impressions until about a year ago when I chanced upon a roster of county magistrates that included notation of the domicile residence of each appointee. It needs to be remarked at this point that a chronological listing of its magistrates, most frequently labeled a sonsaeng an 선생안 is an integral part of every proper "local (-county) gazetteer," or upchi 읍지. These rosters were not maintained, it would seems, as one among the government's stipulated record-keeping function. The initiative appears rather to have been local and was probably a quasi-official activity at best. In consequence the rosters come in a variety of formats and, to further bedevil us, historical accident seems to have decreed more often than not that a roster would come down to us with lacunae, especially in the record of the first century or so of the dynasty.

Nonetheless, a good minimum roster may be defined, as one that offers the magistrate's name, the dates of his tenure, and the succinct reason why he vacated his post. A not uncommon further feature is indication of the magistrate's branch of government service – that is, whether he was a product of the civil or military examination process, or entered service by such other route as that so-called "protection"(um 음). And I have encountered rosters bearing one or two other items of information, but I know only three cases there the place of residence of the magistrates who governed the county is systematically provided. These are Ch'angwon 창원 and Kosong 고성, seesntially coastal counties in South Kyongsang province and Unbong 운봉 county, just east of Namwon in Cholla.

Evidence drawn from the Sonsaeng an ("rosters of magistrates") of these three counties and from rosters for Kyongju and Namwon constitutes the database for this paper. As a matter of further comparative interest I will adduce information from two ch'albang 찰방 ("post-station superintendent") rosters, one for a station near Ch'angwon and the other for a station near Unbong.

The roster of Kyongju magistrates is the only one with which I will be dealing that is complete for the whole of the It Dynasty. Since Kyongju was a "secondary capital" the rank of the magistrate was correspondingly high Junior Second Rand (2B). And as we might expect, the post was given overwhelmingly to civil officials who held the final civil service degree (munkwa 문과). This was not the case, however, in the first century-plus, for only 23 of 64 magistrates are known to have passed the munkwa. At the very end of the dynasty a trend away from civil degree holders also is evident, as may be seen in this tabular representation:

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Other	Seoul	Home	Other	Unknown Residence
1392-1506	**64**	**1.8**	**23**	**41**	**3**	**9**	**3**	**49**
1392-1418	25	1.08	8	17				
1419-1455	115	2.4	3	12				
1456-1506	24	2.13	12	12				
1507-1608	**52**	**1.94**	**50**	**2***	**16**	**10**	**3**	**23**
1609-1724	**77**	**1.5**	**74**	**3**	**52**	**15**	**9**	**1**
1609-1623	9	1.67						
1624-1673	31	1.6						
1674-1724	37	1.37						
1725-1800	**56**	**1.36**	**52**	**3**	**48**	**0**	**5**	**3**
1801-1905	**77**	**1.36**	**57**	**20**	**45**	**4**	**9**	**19**
1801-1834	26	1.31	22	4	21	0	2	3
1835-1863	22	1.32	19	3	14	1	4	3
1864-1874	5	2.0	4	1	1	2	1	1
1875-1905	24	1.33	12	12	9	1	2	12
*Both were military degree holders.								

In addition to the pattern of distribution among civil degree holders and those possessing other entitlements to preferment, changes in the tenure pattern are worth noting. Average years of tenure quickly reached a rather high level and essentially stayed there for two hundred years. A marked decline occurred during the next century-plus (1709-1724), the period during which factional strife seems to have been most virulent, and this decline was particularly marked in the latter half of this period. The

reigns of Yongjo and Chongjo (1725-1800), generally accounted to have been constructive, did not lead to any improvement in the tenure of Kyongju magistrates. The situation remained about the same, overall, in the nineteenth century, but one can discern a slight improvement during that very period, the reign of Kojong, when dynastic institutions were supposedly one the verge of collapse.

A final noteworthy development is the dramatic increase in the appointment of officials resident in Seoul to the Kyongju post, and the attendant decline to negligible numbers of those appointees whose home province was Kyongsang, where Kyongju is located. The reality is rather more striking than the table indicates, for not one among 110 consecutive Kyongju magistrates who served in the 155-year period 1695-1849 is known to have been a resident of Kyongsang Province. At least 93 of these appointees lived in Seoul or its immediate environs. In the light it may well be significant that two of the five appointments made during the "decade of the Taewon'gun"(1864-73) lived in North Kyongsang, quite close to Kyongju.

The roster for Ch'angwon county begins belatedly with an appointment in 1565. It does, however tell us what branch of service each magistrate belonged to, in addition to giving his residence. Particularly noteworthy is that initial rough parity for civil appointees gives way by about 1660 to near-exclusive occupancy of the post by products of the military examination. And in the case of Ch'angwon, too, there is a significant shift to the Seoul resident, as this table shows:

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Mil.	Seoul	Home	Other	Unk. Residence
1392-1564	(Missing)							
1565-1608	**31**	**1.42**	**12**	**18***	**14**	**7**	**10**	**0**
1609-1724	**72**	**1.61**	**21**	**51**	**39**	**16**	**13**	**4**
1609-1623	6	2.5	6	0	2	4	0	0
1624-1673	30	1.67	13	17	15	7	7	1
1674-1724	36	1.42	2	34	22	5	6	3
1725-1800	**47**	**1.62**	**2**	**45**	**42**	**0**	**4**	**1**
1801-1894	**566**	**1.68**	**1**	**55**	**52**	**0**	**4**	**0**
1801-1834	22	1.55	1	21	20	0	2	0
1835-1863	17	1.71	0	17	17	0	0	0
1864-1873	3	3.33	0	3	3	0	0	0
1874-1894	14	1.5	0	14	12	0	2	0
* The other appointee was from the "protection" branch.								

Average tenure in Ch'angwon exhibits little significant change. The fifty years of Sukchong and Kyongjong(1674-1724) again represent a nadir, however, and one cannot help note the heights reached both under Kwanghae(1608-1623) and during the decade of the Taewon'gun - although these time spans are too short, perhaps, to yield statistically significant results. It can be seen, further, that an impressive number of appointees resided in the home province of Kyongsang up to the reign of Sukchong: there were no such appointments after 1708. And indeed the post was virtually monopolized by Seoul residents from that point onward.

The Kosong roster unfortunately has large gaps at each end, for it begins in 1554 and stops in 1784. Its patterns are less clear and some of them are different from those observed hitherto. For one thing, few appointees were civil degree holders in the sixteenth century, few were not in the seventeenth century, and parity existed in the eighteenth century: toward the end, however, the post becomes unavailable to munkwa degree holders. A trend toward Seoul residents is once again present but it is less pronounced at first and gets under way somewhat later; unfortunately, not enough data even to support a speculation is available for the reign of Kojong. With regard to average tenure we find here a steady decline interrupted by a modest but transient recovery in the priod of Chongjo up to Kojong. The Sukchong-Kyongjong half-century once more is markedly worse than the fifty years preceding it. The Kosong tabulation:

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Others	Seoul	Home	Other	Unk. Residence
1392-1553	(missing)							
1554-1608	**28**	**1.96**	**2**	**26***	**13**	**6**	**9**	**0**
1609-1724	**75**	**1.55**	**57**	**18**	**22**	**23**	**30**	**0**
1609-1623	8	1.87	1	7*	3	2	3	0
1624-1673	29	1.72	24	5*	8	11	10	0
1674-1724	38	1.34	32	6	11	10	17	0
1725-1784	**48**	**1.25**	**23**	**25**	**30**	**4**	**14**	**0**

*These are believed to be entirely, or preponderantly, military, but only a few are definitely known to have been such.

A simple listing of Kosong magistrates by name, with almost no further information, does exist for the period 1785-1905. To chart there as well, insofar as the data permits:

1785-1833	27	1.81	14	13	11	1	2	13
1834-1863	18	1.67	5	13	3	1	1	13
1864-1905	35	1.2	0	35				35

The most conspicuous feature of the Kosong data, I think, is the large number of magistrates whose residences are also in Kyongsang province. Nearly one-third of the total in the years 1609-1724 thus were familiar in surely significant degree with the conditions in Kosong before taking up the duties of magistrate. It is true that most made their homes in the upper Naktong River regions, quite far Kosong, and that so well as may be judged few such appointments after 1725 went to Kyongsang residents. Still this statistic stands out.

Turning to Cholla province, the data for Namwon county is haphazardly fragmentary but may be tabulated thus:

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Other	Seoul	Home	Other	Unk.Residence
1392-1572	(missing)							
1573-1608	27	1.33	18	9*	10	4	5	8
1609-1701	64	1.45	39	25#	35	4	9	16
1609-	9	1.66	7	2	27	4	7	11

1623								
1624 – 1673	40	1.25	26	14	27	4	7	11
1674 – 1701	15	1.86	6	9	8	0	2	5
1702 – 1863	(missing)							
1864 – 1905	30	1.4	8	22	11	0	2	17
1864 – 1873	6	1.67	1	5				
1874 – 1905	24	1.33	7	17				
*8 military degree holders, 1 “protection” appointee								
#All were “protection” appointees.								

Average tenure in Namwon shows no significant trend, being at a relatively low level throughout. But the abbreviated evidence for the Sukchong-Kyongjong period runs counter to the pattern observed in all three Kyongsang magistracies. Signs of a shift toward residents of Seoul can be seen, although the large number of unknown residences induces caution. There was a degrease in the proportion of civil degree holders form 1674 and the number of “protections” appointments appears to have been significantly greater than in the three Kyongsang magistracies.

The profile for Unbong county is largely a familiar one. Average tenure was remarkably high, however before falling off inly slightly in the Sukching-Kyongjong period (1674-1724) and then precipitously under Yongjo and Chongjo. This low level changed little thereafter, although there is the usual tempation to see improvement during the Taewon’gun decade. The civil degree holder enjoyed minor representation at best in Unbong, and after 1800 all magistrates, with perhaps one exception, were military men or protection appointees The tabulation:

Perio	No.	Yrs.	Civi	Other	Seou	Ch’ung	Hom	Other

d	Appts.	Tenure	l	*	l	.	e	Residence
1392-1555	(missing)							
1556-1660	**18**	**2.5**	**4**	**14**	**10**	**2**	**4**	**2**
1600-1619	(Unbong attached to Namwon during this period)							
1611-1724	**47**	**2.43**	**8**	**39**	**28**	**9**	**6**	**4**
1611-1623	5	2.6	1	4	3	0	1	1
1624-1673	19	2.63	3	16	10	4	3	2
1674-1724	23	2.22	4	19	15	5	2	1
1725-1800	**51**	**1.49**	**4**	**47**	**32**	**13**	**3**	**3**
1801-1904	**70**	**1.49**	**1?**	**69**	**49**	**9**	**4**	**8**
1801-1863	41	1.54	0	41	29	6	1	5
1864-1873	5	2.0	0	5	2	0	2	1
1874-1904	24	1.29	1?	23	18	3	1	2
*On the basis of identifications made to date, I would hazard a ratio of two military degree holders to each "protection" appointment.								

In Unbong, too, the preference for Seoul residents is marked, and if one may add the Ch'ungch'ong province residents to the total for Seoul and environs, on the ground that they likely represent the same power group, then the statistic becomes overwhelming. But it is difficult to say that the proportion of magistrates from the core Koho 기호 area was significantly higher in the later years of the dynasty, although what shift can be detected is of course in that direction.

It is of interest but of somewhat uncertain significance to similarly chart appointments to the office of Post-Station Superintendent, which

carries the same rack (junior fifth, 5B) as a typical county magistrate. For the Chayo 자여 Station near Ch'angwon in South Kyongsang;

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Other	Seoul	Ch'ung.	Home	Other Res.
1392-1610	(missing)							
1611-1724	57	2.0	24	33	26	8	17	6
1611-1623	5	2.6	0	5	4	0	0	1
1624-1673	22	2.27	1	21	11	2	7	2
1674-1724	30	1.7	23	7	11	6	10	3
1725-1800	39	1.95	38	1	22	11	4	2
1801-1854	30	1.8	30	0	5	3	6	16
1801-1834	16	2.1	16	0	4	2	4	6
1835-1854	14	1.43	14	0	1	1	2	10
1855-1905	(missing)							

Apart from the generally longer and unchanging (until perhaps the very end of the period for which data is available) average years of tenure at Chayo Post-Station, there are two remarkable pattern changes immediately noticeable here. One is the striking shift toward reliance on civil degree holders, to the point where no single Post-Station Superintendent after 1706 owed his appointment to the military degree or the "protection" system – all possessed the highest civil degree. Secondly, and probably to a degree concomitantly, there was a striking movement away from Seoul residents after 1800. Nor was representation from Ch'ungoh'ong province high, only three in fact. Distribution, then, was widespread, and for the first time in this small study significant northern province residents may be noted. Among all the magistrates tabulated in the pages above only tow lived in P'yongan or Hamgyong, but nine of these Post-Station Superintendents appointed after 1800 resided in these

two provinces. This is a number greater by one than the representation for Seoul and Ch'ungch'ong combinded.

What is suggested by this evidence, of course, is a correlation between the rapidly increasing numbers of northern resident civil degree holders after 1800 and these particular government service opportunities. The position of Post-Station Superintendent surely had less prestige than that of county magistrate, and doubtless it was less lucrative. Perhaps no further explanation for the phenomenon need be sought.

The data so far available in the other post-station case, the Osu 오수 Station near Undong, North Cholla, is less full, but it nevertheless reinforces two of the patterns seen at Chayo(Ch'angwon). The brief tabulation:

Period	No. Appts.	Yrs. Tenure	Civil	Other	Seoul	Ch'ung.	Home	Other	Unknown
1392–1438	(missing)								
1439–1506	33	2.06	1	32	1				32
1507–1608	31	*	0	31					31
1609–1691	45	1.84	28	17	7	3	9	9	17
1692–1905	(surely not entirely missing, but not yet located)								
*This roster gives only the year in which the post was taken up, and some periods of tenure are so long as to suggest gaps in the record.									

Clearly this appointment pattern shows the same striking shift to civil degree holders; the shift indeed seems to have begun somewhat earlier, for all appointments form 1643 on were civil. The residential balance again strongly favors the provincial areas, for not only were nine of twenty-eight civil appointees residents of the home province of Cholla,

but the nine "Others" all lived in Kyongsang. The fact that no residents of P'yongsan or Hamgyong, the two northern provinces, yet appear is to be expected, since there were very few civil degree holders from the north before 1700.

Five counties do not a country make, not even when linked together by two post-stations. Yet even so limited an inquiry has yielded much fodder for rumination. To first briefly consider how substantial my passing impressions turned out to be:

(1) The desirability of sometimes filling a county headship with a magistrate who lived not too far away from the area he would govern seems to have been recognized. But pressures to bestow these positions on more favored aspirants gradually and generally proved difficult to resist.
(2) The musical chairs aspect of the Yi office system appears to be reflected much less than I had supposed in appointment of either county magistrates or of post-station superintendents. Especially when it is kept in mind that premature removal from duty may come about through death of the office-holder himself, a death of a parent or other close kin, or because of the "mutual avoidance" regulation, the average tenure figures presented above look rather respectable. Certainly it is hard to find evidence either of dynastic invigoration or of deterioration in these statistics. But I do feel the Taewon'gun may have attempted to reverse decay in this and other parts of the magistrate system.
(3) The imagined trend toward awarding magistracies to military men finds rather strong support in the evidence put forward here. But a proper perspective on this development must note that a strong shift in favor of Seoul-based lineages accompanies it. And we have found, too, that there were offsetting gains by the civil component in securing appointments to the post-stations.

When we turn to the broad question of the role or place of the county governance system in the context of overall dynastic deterioration, I must confess that I find little reason herein to subscribe to a bad-last-magistrate view of the downfall of the Yi. I have not attempted to develop a misrule coefficient from the data I have gathered. Those same irrepressible impressions compel me to suggest, however, that judged by traditional criteria the county magistrate at the end of the dynasty would score about as well as his forerunners.

Much more can be done, even to flesh out the image conveyed by this silhouette. There is a complex of factors involved here and we have only seen in shadow the changing patterns of interaction and interrelationship. But a dynasty is a living organism whose larger processes can best be viewed through the lens of its smaller workings.

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