

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma-Related Conditions in Korean History: Literature Review of Six Cases

Daeho Kim, M.D., Ph.D.¹, Haewon Lee, M.D.¹

¹Department of Neuropsychiatry, Hanyang University, Seoul and Hanyang University Guri Hospital, Gyeonggi, Korea

Abstract

Historical accounts of individuals' psychological reaction to overwhelming trauma are occasionally found in the western literature. The aim of this study was to find similar clinical cases from Korean history. The authors reexamined the 27 cases of suspected mental illness originally revealed in Hong's 1981 study for possible diagnosis of post-traumatic reaction. His brilliant work was the result of a vigorous investigation of four major Korean historical volumes, *Samguk Sagi*, *Samguk Yusa*, *Goryosa*, and *Sinjeung Donggukyeogiseungram*, which combined to cover from the second century BC to the fifteenth century AD. As a result of the present research, the authors found six suspected cases of post-traumatic conditions: 3 of post-traumatic stress disorder, 2 of acute stress disorder, and one of major depressive disorder. In conclusion, the authors add six anecdotal cases to a body of research for the historical validity of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Key words: Trauma, History, Korea, Post-traumatic stress disorder

[Psychiatr Invest 2005; 2 (2): 18-21]

Correspondence: Daeho Kim, M.D., Ph.D. Department of Neuropsychiatry, Hanyang University, Guri Hospital, 249-1 Gyomun, Guri, Gyeonggi, Korea (471-701) Tel: +82-31-560-2274, Fax: +82-31-554-2599, E-mail: dskim9289@hanyang.ac.kr

Introduction

Traumatic events have always been a dark side of ordinary human lives. It is estimated that more than one half of the modern adult population experience at least one traumatic event in their life time¹. At some point in their lives, 7.8% of the US population develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the most representative and well-known post-traumatic syndrome^{1,2}.

The reported lifetime prevalence of PTSD has been lower in Korea with one study³ finding 4.7% in an urban population and another⁴ only 1.5% in a suburban/ rural area. However, these two Korean studies used different instruments for the diagnosis of PTSD, Likewise, cross-cultural differences in the meaning and context of trauma also needs to be considered⁵.

In the west the oldest description of psychological trauma goes back to Homer's *Illyad*⁶. Unfortunately not much is recorded for historical accounts of trauma or post-traumatic reaction outside North America and Europe. This article looked at the ancient Korean historical literature for possible records of trauma and individuals' post-traumatic reactions.

We analyzed Hong's pioneering article⁷ on the Korean historical record of mental illness published in 1981 was reanalyzed for this study. In his study Dr Hong vigorously searched four major historical volumes (*Samguk Sagi*, *Samguk Yusa*, *Goryosa*, and *Sinjeung Donggukyeogiseungram*) covering the era from the second century BC to the fifteenth century

AD (Three States Era and Goryo dynasty). As these great historical records were compiled with the intention of political and state affairs, the focus was not on individuals but kings, the royal family, high officials, and national incidents. In addition, personal and detailed description could be limited and even distorted. Nevertheless Hong identified 27 cases with suspected mental disorders. However, none of them were designated as PTSD or trauma-related.

Methods and Materials

The authors reexamined these 27 cases in Hong's study⁷ for possible post-traumatic reaction and supplemented more information to these cases.

Results

We found six cases of suspected PTSD or post-traumatic reaction among the 27. A summary of these cases is presented in Table 1.

1. Jesang Kim's wife

During King Naemil's reign (AD 356-402), a wife of Jesang Kim, a high government official in Silla

dynasty, was immediately paralyzed in her lower extremities upon hearing of her husband's tragic death. Her husband, Kim died heroically after rescuing a prince who had been a captive in Japan.

Tragically, however, he was arrested and tortured brutally to death. Another record describes that she has become 'Manbuseok' (a stone that waits for her husband). It is written that she had been filled with such sorrow that she laid on the sand shouting in tears. When her relatives tried to carry her home, her legs were extended stiff and she could not sit. This condition seems to have improved spontaneously as it is also written that for many years she used to go up to the hill and mourned looking at the sea.

A sudden loss of motor function and subsequent spontaneous recovery in this case warrant a diagnosis of conversion disorder. However, this case can be also diagnosed as acute stress disorder: exposure to a traumatic event (confronting her husband's death) and responding with helplessness fulfill the criteria for trauma; paralysis of her lower extremities represents an extreme form of depersonalization and becoming a 'stone' is a metaphor for numbing or absence of emotional responsiveness.

TABLE 1. Summary of six cases of suspected post-traumatic conditions from Korean history (AD 4C – 15C).

Case	Year	Trauma	Possible diagnosis	Findings
Jesang Kim's wife	? (356-402)	Death of loved one	Acute stress disorder	Acute despair, Paralysis of lower limbs
Sadaham	549	Death of loved one	Acute stress disorder	Severe mourning, Food refusal, Insomnia, Unexplained death
King Jeongjong	948	Natural disaster	PTSD	Peritraumatic dissociation
King Mokjong	1009	Natural disaster, Fire	PTSD	Phobic avoidance, Functional impairment
King Myeongjong	? (1170-1197)	Witnessing deaths and violence	PTSD	Startle reaction, Hypervigilance
King Gongmin	1365	Death of loved one	Psychotic depression Alcohol abuse	Pathological grief, Depression, Alcohol abuse, Paranoia

PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder

2. Sadaham

Traumatic loss which caused the death of the teen-aged warrior Sadaham to death in AD 549 is described in *Samguk Yusa* and *Sagi*. Sadaham and Mugwannang had been close friends since childhood. When they became Hwarang (young army cadets), they promised that if one of them should die in the battle the other one would have to commit suicide. When Sadaham was 17, Magwannang died during combat. He lamented over his comrade's death and he refused to eat or sleep for seven days. On the seventh day he himself died without apparent cause. Sadaham can be diagnosed as acute stress disorder or adjustment disorder.

3. King Jeongjong (Reigned 945-949)

This King is reported to have felt guilty over killing his political opponents during his accession to the throne. Understandably, he became a strong supporter of the Buddhism and he himself was a faithful believer. In 948, a sudden thunder and lightening storm struck while the king was inspecting the gifts from the locals. He was so shocked that servants had to carry him to another palace (peritraumatic dissociation). Another record writes that he was 'convulsive'. After this incident, he fell ill and died the next year. Despite inadequate information, the record shows the clear relationship between the experience of a threat to life and the subsequent development of mental illness.

4. King Mokjong (Reigned 997-1009)

In the spring of 1009, King Mokjong was caught in a storm on the way back from a visit to a temple. It is written that his heart became weak after this accident. To make matters worse, a few days after the storm he witnessed a fire which burnt a large building and parts of the palace to ashes. The King became disconsolate, felt ill and could not function as a state governor. He was hyper-vigilant that every doors of the palace had to be shut tight and security was maintained on high alertness. Despite these efforts he became more and more ill. He also became agoraphobic and did not allow oth-

ers to visit his bedroom in fear.

This condition continued and absence of King's governing brought about political struggles among the parties. He was finally expelled from the throne and was killed by one of his political rivals. This case illustrates symptoms of hyperarousal and phobic avoidance in PTSD and in addition, social and occupational impairment by the condition.

5. King Myeongjong (Reigned 1170-1197)

He was described as a weak and fearful person because he lived to see constant bloodshed and the death of rebels. Probably his reign was the worst in terms of political violence and he repeatedly witnessed people around him being killed with the on-going power struggle between the parties and local influences continue. He kept his eyes open at all times in fear that others might have attacked him (hypervigilance). He was also described as to get easily startled and fearful at minor stimuli. He later was reported to suffer from depression after the death of his two consorts. Multiple exposure to death and violence may have caused PTSD (described as startled and fearful) and this condition was complicated by subsequent depression after the loss of loved ones.

6. King Gongmin (Reigned 1330-1374)

In the 131st volume of *Goryosa* (History of Goryo dynasty) written in 1451, a wide range of post-traumatic reactions manifested by King Gongmin is described after the traumatic death of his first beloved wife in 1365. He was so depressed that he spent most of his time mourning at her grave and talking to her portrait. He also abused alcohol. Consequently, he had to leave the state's affairs to his prime minister. He also became impotent and lost his libido.

This situation continued unresolved and after seven years in 1372, he finally became psychotic. He used to dress up in women's clothing with make up (overidentification with the deceased wife) and was involved in perverted sexual misconducts. He even threatened the

queen with a sword and ordered his friends to rape the queen in order to have his son. This case illustrates post-traumatic depression that was later accompanied by psychotic symptoms.

Discussion

All of these six cases fall in short of an official diagnoses of PTSD or other post-traumatic conditions. The information and accounts for their behaviors are very limited and short. Furthermore, these records are from official annals of each dynasty. The need for political correctness and the censure against writing any negative aspects about kings and high officials may have minimized the descriptions of their symptomatic behaviors. Nevertheless, these six cases are very likely to provide some clues for the possible diagnoses of these historical trauma-related disorders. Some specific post-traumatic symptoms included startle reaction, hypervigilance, and phobic avoidance.

With the western historical accounts of post-traumatic reaction only begin with Samuel Pepy's diary in 1666⁸ and various railroad accidents⁹ or the American Civil War in the mid 19th century¹⁰, the Korean historical writings are quite early from the fourth century AD. This study only focused on four major historical reports. Further research into Korea's rich folklores, individual writings, and literature will yield many other interesting accounts of how historical Korean figures reacted to traumata.

Moreover, the more recent Chosun dynasty (late 16th C to early 20th C) and the modern Korean era both warrant study of possible historical accounts of psychological trauma and its effects on individuals and the society.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Professor Seock-Kyu Lee, Department of History, Hanyang University for his professional and thoughtful comments on King Gongmin.

References

1. Kessler RC, Sonnega A, Bromet E, Hughes M, Nelson CB: Posttraumatic stress disorder in the National Comorbidity Survey. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1995; 52 (12):1048-1060.
2. American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Press, 2000, pp 424-427.
3. Eun HJ, Lee SM, Kim TH: The epidemiological study of posttraumatic stress disorder in an urban area. *J Korean Neuropsychiatr Assoc* 2001; 40 (4): 581-591.
4. Hahm BJ, Cho MJ: Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in a community population. *J Korean Neuropsychiatr Assoc* 2002; 41 (4): 713-724.
5. deVries MW: Trauma in cultural perspective, in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. Edited by van der Kolk BA, McFarlane AC, Weisaeth L. New York, The Guilford Press, 1996, pp 398-416.
6. Shay J: *Achilles in Vietnam. Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York, Atheneum, 1994.
7. Hong SH: A study of the mental disorders reported in the Korean history. *J Korean Neuropsychiatr Assoc* 1981; 20 (2): 185-194.
8. Daly RJ: Samuel Pepys and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Br J Psychiatry*. 1998; 143: 64-68.
9. Weisaeth L: The European history of psychotraumatology. *J Trauma Stress*. 2002; 15 (6): 443-452.
10. Trimble MR: *Post-traumatic Neurosis. From Railroad Spine to Whiplash*. New York, Wiley, 1981.