In pre-modern times Koreans not only observed unusual phenomena in nature, but also were concerned by portents carrying certain messages to them from Heaven. In Confucian tradition, portents were caused by the actions of man, whereas in the early Christian West they were caused by God. According to the Confucianists, the Korean king was seen as the Son of Heaven within his domain and his actions were thus responsible for portents. Portents included such phenomena as solar or lunar eclipses, solar haloes, daytime darkness, hazy sun, sun-spots, comets and novae, meteors, lightning and thunder, earthquakes, drought, locusts, hen-turned-cock, and dragons, among many other things.

In his recently published monograph, *Portents and Politics in Korean History*, Professor Park, author of many other books on the history of science, investigates the changes that took place in Korean portentology. The study of this Korean historian is based on about 15,500 portents listed in the major sources of Korean history, including *Samguk Sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms and Great Silla, trad. dated 57 BC - 935 AD), *Koryosa* (History of the Koryo Dynasty, 918-1392), and the *Choson Wangjo Sillok* (Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty, 1392-1910) up to 1500. Even though the book is almost the same as the author's Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Hawaii completed in 1977 (the title of Park's dissertation was "Portents and Politics in Early Yi Korea, 1392-1519"), its delayed publication can be justified because of the almost complete lack of scholarly advancement in the field since the late 1970s.

Theories of portents, as they had developed in Han China, reached Korea for the first time during the fourth century and were then applied to Korean society. Tung Chung-shu’s (179?-104? BC) interpretation of portents was first of all a political philosophy in which every portent was viewed as a result of political failures in this world. Before the coming of Chinese portentology, Koreans had
interprted portents in their own ways, but the nature and time of the recorded portents are very often unclear. Professor Park's research informs us that portentology was well-established in Korea by at least the eleventh century, if not before. To exorcise portents, Koreans practiced, until the fifteenth century, a mixture of Confucian, Buddhist, and shamanistic prayers and rituals. Thereafter, however, Neo-Confucian rituals became more and more dominant.

After a critical survey of research sources (Chapter 1) and a brief categorization of various portents in Korean history (Chapter 2), the author starts to examine the different and changing attitudes toward various kinds of portents in Korean history, first during the Koryo dynasty (Chapter 3), then in the early Choson dynasty (Chapter 4). The most remarkable things Park shows us in his book are three mutually interrelated historical transitions, that is, the shifting of the centre of power from the grip of the monarch to the hands of the scholar-officials; the change in the view of portents from "political portentology" to "ethocratic portentism," and the complete change of the Korean Confucian tradition into Neo-Confucianism.

A number of minor shortcomings of this book have to be mentioned. First, Professor Park does not discuss portents and political divinations which often played an important role in many rebellions and religious movements. His research is strictly restricted on the portentology of the ruling elite.

Second, the role of Buddhist monks in geomancy and prediction is over-estimated, when Park says that up to the early Choson period this was a tradition that was primarily the preserve of Buddhist monks. For instance, Park maintains that the key figures in the move of the capital were Buddhist monks. Thus, in his view it was Muhak 無學, Royal Preceptor of the founder of the Choson dynasty, who played the key role in the move of the dynasty’s capital from Kaesong to Seoul (p. 156). Based on my own investigation, however, I am inclined to argue that it was special officers in the palace responsible for geomancy, prediction and astrology that mainly contributed to the preservation of the discipline’s rich tradition. Together with some ministers who understood portentology, these specialists were the key-figures when the move of the capital was discussed.

Third, Park’s book contains a number of misprints and misleading translations of terms. In case of a reprint, their correction would certainly ensure a more comfortable reading. Some examples may suffice here:

p. 21: dvision - division;
p. 26: Myo/ntjong - Myong/jong;
p. 26: king. Yejong - King Yejong;
p. 129: Chu Nsi - Chu Hsi.

The above mentioned minor problems do not, however, detract from the worth of this pioneering research undertaken by Professor Park. Three points may be especially highlighted:
First, his new interpretation of the literati purges in the early Choson period deepens our historical understanding. According to the author, these literati purges were closely related to Neo-Confucian portentology. Neo-Confucian scholars, who emerged as a strong and influential political force in the late fifteenth century, built their "constitution" upon their own type of portentology. Their severe remonstrances with the throne were made possible by the occurrence of portents. This, eventually, led to the literati purge in 1504 executed by King Yonsan (reigned 1494-1506), who embodied an attitude of strict anti-portentology.

Second, Professor Park's investigation clarifies Korea's long historical process of Neo-Confucianisation, as well as the nature of various types of portent-ology. The rise of Confucian scholarship since the eleventh century weakened the position of the established Korean traditional exorcistic practices, above all shamanism, although their suppression was not systematic. Specific prognostication and specific exorcism by shamans for an individual portent, which had been practiced all through Korean history to that time, was gradually giving way to a more generalised Confucian interpretation of portents in political terms, that is, in the tradition of Tung Chung-shu's portentology relating one incident in human affairs to one portent according to the Five Phases theory. The main response to portents was, however, still religious and not political, because until the early thirteenth century each portent was prognosticated and exorcised on an individual basis. It was only during the closing years of the Koryo dynasty that a remarkable historical change took place, that is, a sudden outburst of Confucian rationalism which suddenly expressed itself in a fierce anti-Buddhist and anti-shamanistic campaign against the traditional procedures for dynastic rejuvenation, including proposals for moving the capital. Chong To-jon 鄭道傳 (died 1398), chief architect of the Neo-Confucian Choson dynasty, was in reality, as Professor Park successfully proves, not a Neo-Confucian. Chong's idea of Heaven, and his efforts to limit royal power by placing the king above the actual execution of daily politics, are just like Tung Chung-shu's. In the same tradition, however, King T'aejong 太宗 (reigned 1400-1418) set a new model - the model of a king who actually rules as much as he reigns. For the Chinese scholar Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130-1200), synthesiser of Neo-Confucianism, portents became a barometer by which to measure the degree of achievement of moral principle in a given society, mostly as a mirror for the highest representative of the society, that is, the emperor. In Neo-Confucian portentology, portents prompted the throne to solicit counsel. This means that portents began to serve more often as occasions for unbridled criticism of the throne by scholar-officials. The rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea led to a new era in terms of portentology: Tung Chung-shu's portentology was definitely passé by King Songjong's 成宗 (reigned 1469-1494) reign. In the sixteenth century, Kim Chong 金 occas, a Neo-Confucian scholar, rejected any specific relation between heavenly portents and human affairs. According to Kim, only the cultivation of royal virtue could mitigate portents. The king was no longer a priest who had to
"please Heaven," but more and more became first of all the teacher of his people – a role which he had to exert by serving as the model of human morality. Consequently, a model king had to be receptive to the scholar-officials’ criticism of his government and policies. Under these circumstances, remonstrance became a rapidly growing institution with ever increasing influence.

Third, and last, Professor Park’s research strongly suggests that well-accepted theories among Korean historians, such as the seventeenth-century crisis theory of Professor Yi T’ae-chin 李泰鎰 may be quite wrong. Yi emphasised the uniqueness of the seventeenth-century records of portents when compared with other periods of the Choson dynasty. He did this in order to find corroboration for the existence of a global low-temperature climate during the seventeenth century which might explain the turbulent political disturbances during that century all around the world. Professor Park argues, however, that analysing the portent data for scientific purposes, such as meteorological and astronomical research, cannot be very productive because of the incomplete character of the sources. The author of the book provides a lot of evidence that Korean historians in traditional times recorded certain portents while omitting others. As a matter of fact, kings often wanted to prevent the astronomers from voicing their opinions during the occurrences of unfavourable portents. (Cf. Park 1998, pp. 29, 33, 39, 64, and 203)

In this book, the author also raises the important question of whether astronomical knowledge was used for agriculture during the fifteenth century. During the rule of King Sejong 世宗 (reigned 1418-1450), astronomy and calendar making flourished, a development which modern scholars have usually ascribed to its importance in agriculture. But Park states that astronomical observation had little to do with agricultural productivity, for the development of instruments concentrated on increasing observation of heavenly movements and making this observation more precise. The degree of precision astronomers were aiming at was far above what was needed for agriculture. Exact timing was also the most important matter in sacrificial rites (pp. 199-200).

My brief examination of Park’s new book makes clear that the author deserves to be congratulated for the publication of his life-long work. This book, the publication of which has been delayed for so long, will not only be very helpful for Asian historians of science, but also for students and scholars in many other disciplines in Asian studies including religion, politics, and sociology.