

"Doing Philosophy" on the Periphery

Lee Seung-Hwan

Abstract

In this article, the author tries to articulate why contemporary Korean philosophy is satisfied with simply translating and mimicking Western theories from a historical and cultural psychological point of view. According to the author, Korean philosophy was intellectually colonized at three historical moments: namely, the period of Japanese colonial rule that derided traditional Korean philosophy as uncivilized and unenlightened, the military regimes that actively emulated the West in the name of "modernizing the fatherland," and the period of neoliberal globalization that caused a crisis in humanities and liberal arts. Undergoing these historical changes, Korean philosophy came to identify itself as an importer and translator of Western theories, thus abandoning its originality and self-reliance. At the end of the article, the author concludes with some suggestions and prospects for establishing an autogenous and self-reliant Korean philosophy.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, Korean philosophy, Western-centrism, universality, particularity, post-colonialism, subjectivity

The Sorrow of a Philosopher in the Periphery

In 1988, a prestigious philosophy society held an academic conference titled "Debate on Liberalism vs. Communitarianism." The heated debate between liberalism and communitarianism is one that scholars working in the social and political philosophies of English-speaking countries have been grappling with since the late 1980s. In an effort to overcome the increasing loss of social solidarity, fragmentation of the self, and the loss of meaning and anomie of values arising from a "surplus of liberalism," American and British philosophers began to advocate a social philosophical ideal, dubbed "communitarianism." But philosophers of the liberal camp, concerned with the potential dangers of communitarianism, struck back at this stance. It was in this vein that the "liberalism vs. communitarianism" debate began.

Papers presented at the conference were all well written. Invariably quoting philosophers from English-speaking countries such as John Rawls, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer, the speaker described the progress and significance of the "liberalism vs. communitarianism" debate. Aside from the fact that they were written in Korean, the papers were of such high quality that they could have been published in any American philosophy journal. Yet, I could not help but feel a vague discomfort. What significance does a philosophical debate stemming from a "surplus of liberalism" in the United States carry for Koreans who are suffering from a lack thereof in Korea? What kind of gospel can communitarianism, an idea that started in America amid a wealth of individualism and the loss of community, deliver to Koreans who are suffering from a "surplus of communitarianism," as represented by statism, nationalism, and totalitarianism, or "distorted community," as indicated by regional, familial, and academic ties? Are we not perhaps undergoing "proxy agony" in studying philosophy in order to resolve others' problems rather than our own?

My "vague discomfort" was replaced by a more specific sort during the general discussion. Without exception, participants raised

Lee Seung-Hwan (Yi, Seung-hwan) is Professor of Philosophy at Korea University. He received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Hawaii in 1991. His publications include *Yuga sasang-ui sahoe cheolhakjeok jaejomyeong* (Rethinking Confucianism from a Social Philosophical Perspective) (1998). He is presently a member of the *Korea Journal's* Editorial Board. E-mail: kulee@korea.ac.kr.

questions citing examples from the West, far removed from our own reality, and presenters answered them citing Western examples as if they were agents of Western philosophical studies. At that time, a gold donation campaign was underway in Korea in an effort to overcome the financial crisis, and the news headlines were dominated by stories of massive layoffs and female workers being fired first. But the conference presenters invariably told stories of the West that had little relation to Korea; none of them attempted to adapt and apply the “liberalism vs. communitarianism” debate that was unfolding in English-speaking countries to the Korean situation. Highlighting this discussion was the following question, posed by an older, ranking official in the philosophy society, who asked “Of the two—liberalism and communitarianism—which stance do you think is more appropriate to addressing the random shooting incidents that often occur in American schools?”

This was a case in which people were mistaking social issues taking place in America as our own! Not only did they have to import “theories” but also the “issues” themselves! It is only natural that we should refer to the theories of others who have the same growing pains as us in a bid to resolve our problems. But it makes no sense that our best scholars should engross themselves in a debate to try to “resolve by proxy” the problems of others without delving into our own. Is this because Korean philosophers are philanthropists who agonize over resolving others’ problems, putting aside our own? Or is it because they share the illusion that they, despite indulging in a “hermeneutics commenting on and propagating others’ philosophy,”¹ are engaged in proper philosophizing?

What does “doing philosophy” mean for us? Could it be that we merely discuss issues debated in Western philosophical circles without even considering our own problems? Why should discussion of our problems in our own voice be disparaged as “non-philosophical,” whereas discussion of Western issues is treated as “philosophical”? As

1. Wole Soyinka, the first African who became the Nobel Prize laureate in literature in 1986, called the works of Nigerian philosophers “interpretations.”

past intellectuals physically resided in Korea while living mentally in China, so, too, are today’s philosophers behaving like lofty beings who reside here physically but whose minds are anywhere but here. We have inherited intact the attitude of the Joseon period intellectuals who, without having ever visited Mt. Tai in China, recited a *sijo* poem that states, “However high Mt. Tai may be, it’s just a hill below the sky,” and who derided Korean script as *eonmun* (vernacular writing) while lauding Chinese script as *jinmun* (literary writing). Intellectuals engaged in hollow intellectual pastimes in the name of “universality,” while disregarding the realities and problems we ourselves face, are worthy of being called the greatest heirs to Korea’s colonial intellectual tradition.

Of course, some areas of philosophy have plenty of topics worth discussing, ones that transcend cultures and regions. For example, the following can be discussed within the frameworks and theories of universal concepts: discussions about the scope and limits of cognition of universal beings, called the “human race”; mathematical and logical calculation conducted not in natural languages but artificial signs; and cognitive science that explores the process through which intelligence arises from the brain’s synapses. But in many other areas, particularly those dealing with value, meaning and practice, ‘it becomes difficult to debate while excluding “specific realities” and the “special contexts.” As a philosopher’s saying goes, “Form without content is empty, content without form is blind”; therefore, theories and forms that are not accompanied by specific agonies and problems constitute nothing more than an empty intellectual pastime.

Korean philosophers, in a way, resemble Manichaeans. As Manichaeans divided the world into light (white= good) and dark (black= evil) and thoroughly adhered to the former, so do our philosophers dichotomize knowledge systems into those that are universal and particular, believing firmly that universal truth exists on “the other side” only. Our culture, tradition, history, and experience are extremely rustic, they think, and only statements made by people on “the other side” are true and universal. African intellectuals’ efforts to emulate the white, referred to by Frantz Fanon, Niger-

ian intellectuals' self-portrait of "the interpreters," noted by Wole Soyinka, Middle Eastern intellectuals' role as "indigenous agents," cited by Edward Said, and Korean philosophers' behaving like "military camptown intellectuals," pointed out by Kim Yeong-min, all expose a false consciousness on the part of peripheral intellectuals who admire the center from afar, like sunflowers with their faces pointed toward the sun.

Zeong Hyon-kee berates the attempts to critique and interpret Korean literature using literary theories that were in vogue in the West since the 1970s as "reading with others' eyes."² This unfortunate practice is found in philosophical circles as well as in the literary world. Several "distinguished" Western philosophers like W. Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel and R. Rorty have been invited to Korea at a sizable cost. Of course, it is natural for people to invite foreign scholars in an effort to learn from them. But inviting an outsider to one's home just to ask for their advice on personal matters is a disgrace.

Habermas, who was invited to Korea to discuss the future prospects of our human rights movement, replied that Koreans, being party to the movement, should know better than him. In a newspaper interview prior to his departure from Korea, he made a suggestion that could be taken as either praise or rebuke, stating that Koreans, having improved their understanding of Western philosophy, would do better to turn their attention to traditional Korean philosophies like Buddhism and Confucianism. The same was the case when Apell and Giddens visited Korea. They were asked about Korean labor issues, and in response, they said that Koreans should know more than them. It is comical to invite foreign scholars to Korea and ask them questions about the realities we face here. It would be like a homeowner asking a guest to locate a leak in his house. This attitude of looking obliquely at our own issues and problems through the eyes of others is an inversion of philosophical standards.

2. Jeong (2002, 174-175).

Is Western-centered "Universality" So Universal?

Is the "universality" upheld by Western philosophers and adored by many Korean students of Western philosophy really so universal? René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, drew three proofs from methodological doubt, i.e. the demonstration of the self, the existence of God, and the objective world. To prove the existence of the objective world, Descartes had to first prove the existence of God. He did so by reasoning that unless God guarantees the surety of the senses, demons may use the senses to deceive. If so, does it follow that philosophers in cultural zones that do not believe in God can never reach sure cognition? Were he a Buddhist, would Descartes have trod identical stages of proof? Descartes, who so adored the universality and transparency of reason, was after all "a regional philosopher," colored by the tradition of his religion. Immanuel Kant, who sought the "existence of God," "eternal soul," and a "free will" as the final bases for guaranteeing a practical ethics of humankind itself, was also "a regional philosopher" colored by the tradition of his culture. So many philosophical traditions have produced excellent practical ethics without supposing the "existence of God" and the presence of an "eternal soul"! Why must we believe that the philosophy of a particular region alone is universal?

Indigenous agents of the third world are bent on "civilizing" "colored races," their own brethren, propagandizing that such "regional philosophy" is universal. They maintain that anything other than Western philosophy is superficial and must be weeded out. Some indigenous agents suffer from a multiple-personality disorder. They thoroughly separate their "internal purposes" from their "external purposes." Writing theses and delivering lectures for "external purposes," they wear "white masks" and act as "substitutes" for colonial rulers, denouncing as superficial the cultures and thoughts of their own races. They uphold such universal slogans as freedom, reason, and truth. But when they return to their daily lives, they instantly come back as authoritarian and domineering. Consider also the case of those who suffer from a kind of severe schizophrenia. They

act as henchman to their colonial rulers and seek to satisfy their sadistic urges, belittling and deriding their fellow natives. They take out their suppressed grief and resentment at their maltreatment at the hands of their colonial masters on their “uncivilized” fellow natives. At the same time, the envy they felt at seeing the colonialists’ gorgeous opera houses and august military parades drives them to brag openly in front of their fellow natives as if they themselves were the host of such facilities and events. In that way, they try to vent their sadistic impulses by marginalizing other natives and thereby serving as a stooge of colonial authorities.

All philosophies and thoughts originate from specific time and space coordinates. Kant did not abruptly descend from heaven, carrying his *Critique of Pure Reason*, nor did Georg Hegel emerge from a closed vacuum tube holding the *Phenomenology of Spirit* aloft in one hand. They produced their works after wrestling with problems in a specific time and space, and after undergoing scores of agonies. The same is the case with Dasan Jeong Yak-yong of Korea’s Joseon dynasty, Nagarjuna of India, and Zhuangzi of China. We do not have the right to forcibly prevent people from producing their own solutions, along with their own view of certain issues. Neither do we have the right to force all cultural zones to possess identical views of certain issues as Westerners and thereby develop “identical” solutions.

N. Goodman asserts epistemological relativism. In *Ways of Worldmaking*, he says there can exist many viewpoints for interpreting the world. W. W. Quine advocates ontological relativism, which is stronger than epistemological relativism. Richard Rorty replaces “the Truth” with “truths” and “Philosophy” with philosophies. Charles Taylor, noting that numerous differences are suppressed and excluded under the dogma of universalism, demands that non-universally-shared differences be recognized. Judging other cultures based on the view of truth in one culture is violence, he says. Deconstructionism exposes the “will to dominate others” hidden in a Western metaphysics based on “sameness,” and attempts to restore differences and diversity. The mythology of universality collapses Western

philosophy from the inside. But indigenous agents of the third world would not let universality go. Because once universality collapses, their power base, commissioned by colonial rulers, will be gone. They are desperate to preserve the crumbling mythology of universality, wearing universality, a mummified relic of modernity, on their chests like an iron cross.

The Historical Trajectory of Philosophy on the Periphery

Our millennium-old intellectual tradition experienced its first point of discontinuity with Japan’s colonial rule, which acted in place of Western imperial powers, following the opening of our ports, with the second point of discontinuity occurring in the process of pursuing the national goal of “fatherland modernization” under military regimes. Korea is presently undergoing a third point of discontinuity along with the humanities crisis accompanying neoliberal restructuring in worldwide globalization. If the first discontinuity proceeded from the perspective of the colonizers’ “policy for eradicating Korean culture,” the second discontinuity was the “disposal of use” under modernization, the demand of the times, and the third discontinuity came from the “materialization of values” under the logic of a free market system.

The meta-philosophical discourse on “the continuity and discontinuity of traditional thoughts” can be said to have started in Korea in the late eighteenth century, when Western Learning came to the country. In Dasan Jeong Yak-yong (1762-1836), a member of the school of Practical Learning (Silhak) in the latter years of the Joseon dynasty, we find a hermeneutic standard attempting to link the heritages of tradition and modernity through a fusion of Confucianism and Western Learning. Arduous efforts to positively reform various forms of traditional philosophy by integrating the West’s modern thoughts are found in Hyegang Choe Han-gi (1803-1875). Faced with military and cultural incursions from the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, a conflict developed between those

who rejected heterodoxy and defend orthodoxy and those who advocated for enlightenment. The conflict was cut short by Japanese imperialists who replaced Western powers, while nothing productive was gained through subjective endeavors. Japan, dreaming of “a little Europe in Asia,” employed a policy of deliberately distorting or disparaging the traditional philosophies of East Asia in a bid to dominate it. Takahashi Toru, a professor of the history of Korean philosophy at Keizo Imperial University (today’s Seoul National University), facilitated Japan’s cultural domination of Korea through a very obscure and academic formula, equating Korean philosophy with stagnation, dependence, disruption, and partisanship.

Negative images of traditional Korean thoughts, fomented by Japanese imperialists, were successively carved into the brains of the colonized. When the first republic was inaugurated after liberation, traditional philosophy was again disparaged by Syngman Rhee, who was equipped with an American mindset and religious beliefs. Following the May 16 Military Coup of 1960, the negative images of traditional Korean thoughts fomented by Japanese colonialists were inherited without alteration by Park Chung-hee, a graduate of Japan’s Military Academy. Under the Cold War system, Park, upholding the slogan of “modernizing the fatherland” on the strength of U.S. aid, went to great pains to emulate Western civilization. “Modernizing the fatherland,” the pan-national agenda of the time, called for emulating Western capitalism. “Imitative modernization” meant thoroughly emulating the West in not only the social system, but also in culture, thoughts, and even religion. Given this situation, progressive intellectuals regarded their own culture and thoughts as uncivilized and barbarous, and asserted that they needed to dissociate themselves from the past as soon as possible. They naturally believed that Western philosophy alone guaranteed “truth.” Korean researchers of philosophy, by building a wall against their own history and traditions, lapsed into a state of waging “proxy warfare” or indulging in “interpretation” based on theories imported from the West. Under the long authoritarian rule of Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan, and Roh Tae-woo, critical, creative, and autonomous ideas were not

tolerated. Hence, philosophers either lectured about “national ethics” at universities as part of anticommunist education, or were indulged in upper-class intellectual pastimes, making their beds atop the clouds of abstract thoughts. One of the reasons why Korean philosophers fell into “interpretation,” closing their eyes to specific realities and demands of the times, can be found in our refracted modern history. Hong Yun-ki describes the adverse fate of “philosophers in the peripheries,” who could not express themselves in their own voices and think with their own ideas, by saying, “In Korea, the owl of Minerva doesn’t fly even at night.”³

The colonial experience under Japanese imperialism, the suppression of free thought, and imitative modernization under military regimes cannot be excluded from explanations of why Korean philosophers were unable to think for themselves. Our modernization was imitative and our philosophy was nothing but imitative thinking, importing and interpreting Western theories. In the course of our modernization, “universality” always resided in the West, and our traditions, history and culture were regarded as something that should be easily scrapped. Hence, the internalization of Western viewpoints, self-disparaging perceptions of reality, hatred of our own culture and traditions, and subordinate thought patterns such as found in pro-American flunkeyism, naturally infected intellectuals. (Or intellectuals themselves might have been carriers of the disease of self-abasement.) As a consequence, Korean philosophy, having lost subjectivity and autogenous power, became a kind of sub-contractor who imports, introduces, and interprets Western philosophy, which was rushed into the country in the name of “universality.” Nothing more than “national nihilism” lurked behind such self-denial.

The discontinuation of the world of thought by colonization is not limited to us. Greeks, dominated by the Ottoman Empire for over 400 years, could only study their traditional philosophy in Germany or Britain, and no philosophical legacy remains in the Middle East,

3. Hong (1999, 240).

which the ancient Greek philosophers traveled to study. Korea may be fortunate after all, in the sense that Koreans do not have to visit the country of their colonizer in order to study its traditional thoughts.

Severed Traditions within Academia

We briefly discussed above the extra-academia momentum that brought about the discontinuation of Korean philosophical traditions, namely the historical discontinuation by colonization, imitative modernization under military authoritarianism, and the crisis of the humanities stemming from neoliberal structural reforms. Let us now review the causes of this discontinuation within academia. As the biggest cause, we have to cite changes in the “ontological foundations of thinking.”⁴ Several variants can be cited as ontological foundations of thinking, including collective unconsciousness, ideology and language, as well as political and economic factors. The sociology of knowledge holds that people’s thinking is influenced by those variants, and that changes in those variants are accompanied by changes in thought patterns that are based on these variants.⁵ According to the hypothesis premised by the sociology of knowledge, it can be said that the main reason for the discontinuation of traditional thoughts early in the modern age was the changed ontological foundations on which traditional thoughts were based.

In the process of moving into the modern age from a premodern age, we can find changes in systems of thought accompanying “changes in ontological foundations.” Examined first from an eco-

4. The author attempts to understand the concept of “ontological foundation of thinking” in a somewhat moderate sense and in the wider sense as shown in Mannheim’s “ontological restraint of thinking—*seinverbundenheit*” rather than through the concept of economic restoration theory called “determination theory of the being of thinking” supported by Marxists.

5. Song (1990).

nomie point of view, the premodern agricultural economy shifted into a capitalistic production pattern, and this change in economic foundation caused traditional ethics to shift their base from community ties to contractual relations. In the political aspect, too, status relationships shifted from personal subjugation to that of equality and freedom. Such changes resulted in a shift from virtue-centered ethics to rights-centered ethics and from family-centered ethics to individualistic ones. In language, too, the Chinese script was replaced by Korean script in official documents and academia, and accordingly the traditional intellectual world fell into an abyss of dead language, which modern Koreans could barely comprehend. Changes in the “ontological foundations” of politics, economy, and language thus resulted in enormous alterations in our consciousness, and traditional thoughts now remain as a system of codes only a small number of experts can understand.

Another reason for the disruption of traditional philosophy is that they did not agree with Western philosophy in terms of “research topics” or “research methods.” Because of this, many aspects of traditional philosophy were regarded as “non-philosophical” or “illogical” and were even excluded from the realm of learning under the reasoning that Western philosophy did not agree with their study themes and methods. Bent on regarding and accommodating Western philosophy as universal, we did not ask why the learning of a particular time and region should be upheld as universal in other regions as well. According to Benveniste, however, Aristotelian logic and category theory were abstracted from a particular language, called “ancient Greek.”⁶ According to Martin Heidegger and Derrida, many problems of Western philosophy, particularly in the realm of “general ontology” that deals with being in general, arose from grammatical features of Indo-European languages that used the copula.⁷ It is thus not appropriate to dismiss as irrational or illogic the Asian cultural zone’s system of thinking, which is devoid of the copula, based

6. Benveniste (1992, chap. 6).

7. Heidegger (1959, chap. 2) and Derrida (1982).

on the yardstick of the West's formal logic and category theory. (In this respect, the same applies to the Korean alphabet. *Ida* and *itta* in the Korean language, which are often translated as "to be," do not entirely coincide with the verb "to be" in English.) "Difference in language" thus gives rise to differences in rules of thinking (logic) and content of thoughts (theme). Traditional philosophy scholars, overwhelmed by Western philosophy, however, tried to define traditional philosophy in a way that matched the structure of Western philosophy instead of developing the unique characteristics and logic of traditional philosophy. Accordingly, analysis of the metaphysical concepts of *li*, *qi*, *xin*, and *xing* were only conceived as traditional philosophy on the surface, while the metaphysical flesh and bones were completely destroyed. Abstract concepts thus alienated from the living world were reformulated under Western philosophical networks of "ontology" and "epistemology." But many themes dealt with in traditional philosophy cannot evidently be reformulated by the frameworks of "ontology" and "epistemology," as referred to in Western philosophy.

Some Korean philosophers who attempt to understand "philosophy" only through the particular viewpoint of Western philosophy assert that traditional philosophy cannot be called "philosophy" according to their narrowly defined criteria. For example, Shin Oh-hyun, defining "philosophy" as a "theoretical system established as an a priori comprehensive proposition involving being," asserts that ethics, value theory, and metaphysics cannot be included within the category of philosophy, that most traditional philosophies cannot be embraced by the category of philosophy, and that most thinking systems cannot be regarded as "philosophy."⁸ Defining the category of philosophy this way, based on a particular view of philosophy, excludes not only traditional Korean philosophy but also a considerable portion of Western philosophy. Kim Gwang-su criticizes this exclusive and self-righteous attitude as "dialect-ism." He says,

8. Shin (1997, 65-81).

"subdivisional philosophy societies have mushroomed, but we are yet to see the appearance of 'works' produced as achievements of the entire philosophy world, since philosophers use different 'languages,' adhere to different philosophical thoughts, and employ different methods in philosophizing. The "dialect-ism" does not end merely in making it impossible for people with different dialects to understand each other. Its adherents nakedly disparage philosophies that use other methods, asking "Is that, too, a philosophy?" and regard those who use different dialects as if they were "spacemen."⁹

Some Korean philosophers' extremely narrow-minded and dogmatic attitude, as Kim Gwang-su notes, differs little from the assertion that natives of regions other than Western Europe who lived before the spread of Christianity would have all gone to Hell. As such an assertion is unconvincing to people who do not believe in Christianity, however, so will the view of philosophy held by Shin Oh-hyun not be accepted by people who do not support the foundationalism of the modern West. A narrow-minded view of philosophy, devoid of the generosity employed by philosophical interpretation and insight into mankind's intellectual history, has not only limited the diversity of philosophical thinking, but also helped shrink the ground of "modern Korean philosophy" that should maintain tradition and continuity. Such a narrow-minded and exclusive view is a delusion and merely a part of foundationalist dogma.

For the Restoration of "Differences" (Periphery) Alienated from "Sameness" (Center)

Damage from totalitarian philosophy attempting to force a single "sameness" upon others increased when it set "Western modernity" as the sole guidepost of all civilizations. In the process of "imitative modernization," we exerted ourselves to achieve our set goal of

9. Kim (1997).

“becoming the same” as the West. But the modern age deprived us of too many things, though it gave us material abundance. In place of giving us productivity and efficiency, it robbed us of the joy of labor and the significance of “living together”; it deprived us of common good and the sense of ties, while letting us taste freedom and rights. While giving us material abundance and convenience, the modern age led us down the road of materialism and mammonism, and left behind environmental pollution in return for teaching us science and technology. In exchange for teaching us logic and reason, it robbed us of our aesthetic and nature-friendly sensibilities. Influenced by neoliberalism, which tries to paint every nook and corner of the globe with “market logic,” anything extraneous to the increase of capital was excluded, weeded out, and suppressed. All human beings who did not contribute to increasing capital were to be weeded out, “learning” that was irrelevant to capital increase disappeared, and “cultures” and “thoughts” that did not benefit capital aggregation were buried. How violent it is to judge everything with the single yardstick of efficiency! How reckless it is to attempt to confine everything to the single notion of “sameness,” given the many types of diversity that exist in the world!

It is high time that we establish a philosophy of “difference.” We must rid ourselves of the single yardstick dubbed “efficiency” and learn to restrain our desires. We must free ourselves of the fetters of “utility maximization” and pursue sharing and harmony. We must overcome mammonism, which stimulates blind greed, and instead dream of jump-starting character development. Finally, we must turn away from the infighting over inalienable rights and endeavor to understand the hardships of the weak.

At this juncture, we must look back on the intellectual traditions of the periphery, which have been alienated on the grounds that they are not Western. Restraint of desire, community harmony through impartiality and public ownership, bonds of membership and harmony through the pursuit of common good, perfection of character through self-cultivation and the fusion of labor and leisure—these are not retrogressive views held by primitive civilizations but future

guideposts to be pursued by modern people. Traditional ethics demand reflective restraint rather than “desire for desire’s sake,” aim at a continuous and secure “sense of bonds” instead of “using others as tools” through calculation and deception, and advise perfection of character through self-cultivation rather than intemperance and self-indulgence committed in the name of freedom. They also stress pursuing genuine leisure activities that revitalize people, getting reacquainted them with nature, building a sense of solidarity towards nature, and encouraging mutual communication between people that is not motivated by showing off one’s possessions and wealth. In this respect, the intellectual tradition of the periphery, which modern Western philosophy has abused as a symbol of barbarism and retrogression, can instead be considered a new, progressive logic that can warn against the shallow, materialistic capitalist modernity, and may function as “a counter-discourse” against economic efficiency and material progress.

Human beings are undetermined animals. Empowered to change themselves, people have the power to change their environment, culture, and reality. Having imitative “progress” as a guide based on Western experience through “imitative modernization,” we have followed this model as our society’s only goal. Confining progress to a model based on the “reason” of a particular period and of a particular cultural zone, however, could cause us to forego a variety of local alternatives, even while forfeiting the power to produce new variations. The globalization discourse that emphasizes “universality” has reproduced American hegemony intact since the era of imperialism, and globalization and universalization centered on Western civilization runs the risk of eliminating possible alternatives by obliterating regional, cultural diversities. In this respect, we need “self-reliant progress” that seeks to “overcome the colonial” and pursues an “reflexive modernization” that transcends the limits of capitalistic models.

I prefer Emmanuel Levinas and Gilles Deleuze to Plato because they talk about considering “difference” rather than “sameness.” I also prefer Laozi and Zhuangzi to Shang Yang and Han Feizi because

they affirm and love the diversity of all beings that coexist in nature. Confucius once said, "A man of virtue pursues harmony with others, but does not become the same as others." "Difference" is the origin of one's identity. If all things were the same, we would not call them by proper nouns; they would be classified as "things" devoid of inherent characteristics. If people are not "things" and if they are to maintain their proper names, we should have our own characteristics and possess our own memories and purposes. People devoid of their own "narrative" lack identity. When we forget our joys and sorrow, and our nostalgia and yearning for the cultural communities, and their histories of successes and frustrations, to which we belong, we become nothing but idealized world citizens suffering from "self-oblivion."

In the opening scene of a documentary, titled *Rape of Nanjing*, an old man with a white beard appears. With a slender, sinewy hand, he opens to a page in the *Lunyu* (Analects of Confucius), which reads, "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you." Just as the Nazis massacred the Jews, the Japanese imperialists slaughtered many Chinese because they were different from them. Hidden behind these actions are the desire to eliminate "what is different" and expand "what is the same" in a greedy bid for power and domination. Ever since the Middle Ages, the Crusades have continued under the guise of eliminating heresies, and ethnic cleansing is still underway under the cloak of "sacred war." Other slaughters are in progress in many places in the world. The culture of violence that has ceaselessly alienated and oppressed others had led humankind to "regression," not "progress," to "co-destruction," not "co-prosperity."

I want a civilization of peace, not one of violence; I want a philosophy of diversity, not totality; I yearn for "tolerant thinking" that loves the diversity of difference, not "fascist thinking" that forces "sameness" on everyone. Zhuangzi rejected the idea of assigning the status of victor to any of the numerous viewpoints that exist in the world. Like a great, mythical bird flying high through the sky, he looks down on insects that claim they can jump higher than any

other. Cicadas can jump no higher than the span of a hand. Still, they boast and compete to see who can jump the highest. The bird regards their pathetic quarrel with pity. Likewise, Zhuangzi acknowledged that all beings have their own specific viewpoints. But he did not feel that one viewpoint is absolutely right, as the insects that crawl, animals that run, and birds that fly all have their own *raison d'être*. Accordingly, all beings need freedom to live according to their own nature, and must tolerate and respect the differences among them. Zhuangzi even rejects a human-centered viewpoint as violent. According to Zhuangzi, human beings are not superior to any other being in the universe. They are equal to all others, and judging others by human standards is an abuse of authority and an insubordination to nature. Zhuangzi urged all human beings to free themselves of a human-centered perception and to embrace all the diversity and chaos flickering in the phenomenal world.

Modern subjects, who regard their own viewpoints alone as right, have long realized their desire to dominate "other races," "other cultures," and "other beings." The terrible downside of this includes not only the massacre of "other races" and imperial invasions, but also environmental pollution, destruction of nature and humanity, and distrust and enmity among human beings. The modern concepts of universality, reason, capital, liberty, science, and technology that have constituted modernity must change. Thinking in terms of uniformity must change to thinking in terms of diversity, human-centered thinking into environmental thinking, and materialist thinking into spiritual thinking. An alternative to modernity must be sought from a thinking system other than modernity. We must now turn our eyes to the intellectual assets of "peripheral civilizations" that have been alienated and rejected under the charge of having rejected modernity. Needed is a shift towards a system of thought that is progressive because it is primitive, that offers comfort because it is simple, and that invokes inspiration because it is poor but honest. This is the very reason why I am interested in Korea's traditional thoughts. The direction Korean philosophy should pursue in the future, I believe, lies in exploring such thinking.

Western philosophy scholars often reproach me, asking, “What’s the use of focusing on the regional intellectual tradition of Korea at a time when universal Western civilization dominates the world?” or “Why research past thoughts now when modern civilization dominates?” The reasons why Korea’s intellectual tradition, developed in the periphery as it is, should restore a link with modern philosophy can be summarized as follows.

First, the loss of “cultural self-identity” arising from social changes causes serious confusion in the consciousness of members of an identical cultural zone. As self-identity is essential for individual existence, so is the restoration and maintenance of a nation’s “cultural identity” essential for the existence of a nation and its culture. “Cultural identity” can be secured through sustained experience of the cultural traditions and historical experiences shared by members of a cultural zone. In this respect, it is necessary today to interpret and reinterpret our traditional thoughts. For the Korean nation, which lost its ideological centripetal force due to the division forced on it by world powers, the historical experiences and cultural traditions of North and South Korea could function as an adhesive for the reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Second, the ontological foundations based on the universality of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, dubbed humankind, have continued unchanged despite changes in political and economic bases following transitions in civilization. Desirable relationships between human beings, the blueprints for an ideal life and society, and reflections on relationships between human beings and nature can be the objects of philosophical research today, just as they were in ancient times. Perpetual philosophical questions arising from the fundamental attributes of *Homo sapiens*, despite social and economic changes, lead us to diverse “dialogues among civilizations.”¹⁰ In this respect, we constantly need to turn our eyes to and seek direction from our diverse attributes in an effort to resolve the problems we are destined to

10. “Philosophy as human conversation” is a concept propounded by Rorty.

encounter universally.¹¹

Third, modernity has presented us with the benefits of developed production power and expanded freedom. But at the same time, we are burdened with the dual task of achieving and overcoming modernity in order to resolve the numerous problems accompanying it, like the wealth gap, mammonism, anomie of value, environmental pollution, loss of a sense of common good, and the fragmentation of the self. In order to achieve the yet-to-be-fulfilled modernity, we have to refer positively to the accomplishments of the modernized West. To overcome modernity, however, we must humbly turn our ears to the experiences and traditions of “an age other than the modern age.” Furthermore, introspection on our culture and history is needed not only for diagnosing our problems, but also for mapping out solutions using a formula familiar to our experiences.

Prospects and Suggestions

Many students of Korean philosophy perceive particular philosophical stances as alone guaranteeing absolute truth and disparage all other philosophical viewpoints and intellectual traditions. This hide-bound way of thinking, fancying oneself to be a lone propagator of truth, must be discarded. We bear the historic responsibility of restoring our traditions that have been interrupted by foreign powers, and a common responsibility to create a more lofty narrative transcending the narrow-minded dichotomy of East and West. At this juncture, students of philosophy should cooperate with one another and participate in a common dialogue that can solve the country’s problems instead of asserting the efficacy of one’s own endeavors.

Due to the success of cooperative efforts in the transition from tradition to modernity, China saw its heritage of traditional philoso-

11. Kil Hui-seong says the process of consistently understanding anew traditional philosophy through horizontal fusion (*horizontverschmelzung*) itself is the best way to link traditional philosophy with contemporary philosophy. Kil (1998.)

phy naturally linked to contemporary philosophy. Fang Dongmei, Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, and Liang Shuming, distinguished philosophers of modern and contemporary China, are all men of immense erudition in modern and contemporary philosophy of the West, and all reinterpreted their traditional philosophy in a way compatible with the times. We will be able to establish continuity between traditional philosophy and contemporary philosophy only when we base our understanding of them on the realities we ourselves face in a similar way and precisely understand a variety of thoughts. Contemporary Korea has its own pioneers, like Yi Sang-eun and Kim Gyeong-tak, who opened a new horizon for “contemporary Korean philosophy” through creative understanding of Eastern and Western philosophies and of ancient and modern thoughts. Succeeding generations, while striving to preserve the successes of our forebears, must work together to transcend this wall of specialization.¹² I will conclude this thesis with the following naive suggestions to students of philosophy for the sake of establishing an autogenous and self-reliant Korean philosophy.

Based on Reality

Hong Yun-ki’s observation that “in Korea, the owl of Minerva doesn’t fly, even at night” applies not only to students of Western philosophy, but traditional philosophy as well. If understanding of the past is to be an intellectual resource in sync with lived reality, without

12. These observations made by Yu Gil-jun (1856-1914) open a new horizon for us. Amid conflicts between conservatism and enlightenment, Yu criticized conservatives, bent on preserving traditions as “enemies of enlightenment,” and progressives, intent on reform as “criminals of enlightenment.” Distinguishing “realistic enlightenment” from “nominal enlightenment,” Yu described an adherent of the former as “one who delves into principles and origins of things and devises ways befitting the situation of the country,” and a follower of the latter as “one devoid of knowledge about things and analytical capacities, who asserts programs based on others’ ideas and causes no small financial waste.” We have to reflect ourselves if we are not engrossed in “nominal enlightenment,” averting our eyes from “realistic enlightenment.” See Yu (1971, 380-381).

remaining on the level of collecting antiques, those who study philosophy must develop a sharper understanding of the time they live in. Western philosophy scholars, too, so that their endeavors constitute not “interpretation” but genuine “doing philosophy,” should hold a sincere and keen understanding of the Korean context. The retrogressive stance of regarding some theories as valuable in themselves regardless of practice is depicted as “Byzantinism” by some scholars of intellectual history.¹³ For future Korean philosophy to clear itself of the stigma of being “retrogressive” or engaging in “interpretation,” students of philosophy themselves need to turn keen eyes to the realities and contexts in which they are placed.

Studying in Our Language

A Korean translation of a book written by a prominent German philosopher has pages devoid of a period. One can hardly understand what the pages say because no linkage can be found between the subjects and predicate verbs, and there are too many subjective postpositional words and demonstrative pronouns. Understandable as it is that philosophical articles written in German are difficult to follow, academic papers are supposed to be comprehensible. If even philosophy scholars cannot understand them, then something is seriously wrong. It must either be because the translation was done in a coded language decipherable only by members of an exclusive academic elite, or because the translator’s logic was immature. In this regard, Yoon Pyung-joong’s observation is worth noting: “An article that is unnecessarily difficult or heavy is probably so because the writer failed to properly understand the theme, his logic was immature and disorganized, or his command of the Korean language was poor.”¹⁴

It is hard to translate books written in difficult foreign languages into Korean; it is harder to transcribe texts written in the dead lan-

13. Gramsci (1986, 207-209).

14. Yoon (forthcoming).

guage of Chinese script into contemporary language. Though many Western students of philosophy complain that they do not understand what theses on Eastern philosophy have to say, students of Eastern philosophy shake their heads reading papers written based on literal translations of Western languages. Philosophical theses should at least be comprehensible when read assiduously and furthermore reach the level of revealing the author's individuality and profound thinking.

Be Open-minded

We must eliminate the attitude of being an intellectual colony that, captivated by narrow-minded and arbitrary Western-centered views of truth, attempts to close our eyes at a time when Western philosophy, having entered the post-modern era, is itself desperate to break free from the dogmatism of "logo-centrism" and "Euro-centrism." We must rid ourselves of the narrow-minded attitude that insists that one's field of study alone defines truth, and that perceives other doctrinal factions and intellectual traditions as inherently untrue. In addition, students of philosophy must pursue logical consistency and sensitivity while endeavoring to narrow the gap between "philosophy" and "reality" through a level-headed understanding of the problems with which they themselves live.

Be Philosophically Minded

For our philosophy to be sublimated into a genuine philosophy transcending "interpretation," students themselves must first of all possess a sincere and intense "philosophical attitude." If "philosophy" corresponds to the "manufacturing" of concrete products, "interpretation" corresponds to the "marketing" that explains and publicizes them. However, it is said that in order to make more profits in capitalism, marketing cannot exist without manufacturing. "Doing philosophy" needs critical, creative, autonomous, and perceptive thinking. The attitude of earning a livelihood relying on others' labor, selling

others' issues packaged in cheap language, or following the theories put forth by eminent foreign philosophers intact without suffering one's own issues all are far from genuine "doing philosophy."

Be Self-reliant

The obsession with and sense of inferiority about being "a yellow-skinned man wearing a white mask," held by "intellectuals in the peripheries," arise entirely from a deficiency of "confidence." Yu Yeong-mo once lectured his audience to "obscure the sun," noting that many stars lose their own light because they are blotted out by the much stronger sun. To appreciate the beauty of individual stars, it is necessary to boldly obscure the sunlight. Likewise, to disclose the beauty of intellectual traditions at the periphery, it is necessary to block the strong light that emanates from the center. "Autogenous learning," a demand of the times, should not be interpreted in the narrow sense of merely exploring "the stuff of learning" from our own cultural traditions. "Autogenous learning" must be interpreted as referring to the attitude of students who, after grounding themselves in their own specific contexts, attempt to resolve problems with a self-reliant and positive attitude. Once Korean philosophy students, based on the common foundation of the "reality of the peripheries," think and debate our issues and problems with confidence in a mutually understandable language, with an open and sincere attitude, the disgrace of "camptown intellectuals" will be dispelled and self-reliant and autonomous learning will be able to take root.

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GLOSSARY

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|---------------------|-----|
| <i>eonmun</i> | 諺文 |
| Fang Dongmei (Ch.) | 芳東美 |
| <i>jimun</i> | 眞文 |
| <i>li</i> (Ch.) | 理 |
| Liang Shuming (Ch.) | 梁漱溟 |
| Mou Zongsan (Ch.) | 牟宗三 |
| <i>qi</i> (Ch.) | 氣 |
| <i>siip</i> | 時調 |
| Silhak | 實學 |
| Tai (Ch.) | 泰 |
| Tang Junyi (Ch.) | 唐君毅 |
| <i>xin</i> (Ch.) | 心 |
| <i>xing</i> (Ch.) | 性 |

(Ch.: Chinese)