

# The Historical Semantics of the Modern Korean Concept of Philosophy\*

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to review the historical processes of how the concept of philosophy was constructed in modern Korea and also how its representations were used; as well as the pattern of changes that the concept of philosophy brought about in the traditional knowledge system of modern Korea. Before philosophy was established as an academic concept, gyeokchi 格致 (the investigation of things), gungni 窮理 (the study of principles), and seongni 性理 (human nature and natural law) were interchangeably used as words and concepts that were synonymous with philosophy. However, the absence of the word “philosophy” does not mean the absence of the concept of philosophy per se. Modern “philosophy” in Korea emerged as the result of multilayered interactions between the traditional worldviews and the modern ones, as well as the tension between universality and the particularities of the knowledge systems. These interactions are evidence for historical changes in the semantics of the concept. From Korea’s independence until the present day, Japanese colonialism influenced not only the domain of philosophy but also humanities as a whole.*

**Keywords:** philosophy, translation, conceptual history, appropriation, knowledge system, dailyness, modern era

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## Introduction

Philosophy, along with literature and history, is widely regarded as belonging to the humanities. However, the word “philosophy” did not exist in the premodern Korean knowledge system. It took a significant period of time for scholars to realize that the absence of the word “philosophy” does not mean the absence of the concept *per se*.

Before philosophy was established as a general academic discipline in Korea, such terms as *gyeokchi* 格致 (the investigation of things), *gungni* 窮理 (the study of principles), and *seongni* 性理 (human nature and natural law) were generally used as denoting philosophy. The semantic rupture between the traditional academic concepts and the translated terms for philosophy was influenced by factors such as the scientism of modern Western academia, the departmentalization of academic disciplines, the objectification of nature, and the practical concerns of academia. The process through which the concept of philosophy emerged reveals the collision of traditional knowledge with its modern counterpart and its repercussions, and also the problems of translation. In general, this article is a review of the processes by which the concept of philosophy and its representations were constructed, as well as the changes that took place in the traditional knowledge system of modern Korea.<sup>1</sup>

In this article three major issues are addressed in a critical review of how the Western concept of philosophy was introduced to Korean academia, as well as the subsequent establishment of modern Korean philosophy. First the problematique of how the concept of philosophy was standardized by a viewpoint so that the relationship between the so-called cultural exporter and importer was unidirectional, that is the

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1. In his study of conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck noted that the history of concepts were central to the politico-social changes in the modern era. From this perspective, the history of the concept of “philosophy” might refract changes in Korean society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, translated by Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke, and Jobst Welge, with a foreword by Hayden White (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

colonized imitate the colonizer's knowledge system as a paradigm of "civilization." Even taking into account the arguments of cultural hierarchy, all cultures interact with one another in various ways. In addition, a culture assimilated into another culture naturally exerts influence upon it, despite the assimilation. Therefore, it is necessary to note patterns of mutual appropriation between an assimilated culture and an assimilating culture, which are differentiated from each other depending upon the power, capital, and a colonized people's desire for emancipation.

Secondly, one must take into consideration that the processes (by which a word attains the status of a concept) refract the relative weightiness of topos and tempo, which is signified by the concept. The aforementioned weightiness should be analyzed in both diachronic-vertical and synchronic-horizontal ways. The horizontal aspect refers to translanguaging practices<sup>2</sup> whereas the vertical aspect refers to a study of the conceptual differences between "present past" and "past present," as opposed to a study of the present past handed down by history.<sup>3</sup> Even if the people in a colonized state internalize the colonizing state as the object of their desire, they cannot be free of their traditional cultural patterns. The introduction of modern Western concepts not only brought changes to the knowledge system of East Asian culture—as represented by the Chinese writing system, its classical literature, and the (Neo-)Confucian ideology—but were also indebted to traditional knowledge systems. In particular, the study of the modern Korean history of concepts was complicated by the multifarious conditions concomitant with the introduction of concepts from the West through China and Japan.

Thirdly, in the study of modernity from the perspectives of the

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2. Introducing the concept of translanguaging practice, Lydia Liu argued for a higher possibility of cross-cultural interpretation and a reconsideration of lingual mediation. See Liu (1995, preface).
  3. "Past present" refers to what the people in the past believed to be true and what they believed their past and future to be, in connection with their past experiences, expectations, and remembrances. In short, it is what the people in the past had in mind when they referred to that time as "present." See Hoelscher (2009, 17).

academic discipline of conceptual history, scholars should be careful not to narrow their cultural perspectives by reverting to Eurocentrism in studying the origins of modernity; and also guard against Eurocentric academic sovereignty and power-knowledge discourses. Too much emphasis on the origins of a concept and its presupposed universality is likely to lead to the error of judging the self through the perspective of the other.<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that both the implicit and explicit influences of modern Western concepts, as well as the notion of “creative misinterpretation,” should be subjected to a close reexamination. This sort of problem is not confined to the concept of philosophy alone, but also applies to scholarly approaches of Korean modernity from the conceptual history perspectives.

The history of Korean modern and contemporary philosophy is schematized into three sociopolitical periods: the modern enlightenment era (1895-1910), the Japanese Colonial and Korean War era (1910-1953), and the post-Korean war era (1953–present). The focus of this article is on the period from the modern enlightenment era until the 1920s, when the colonial Japanese established philosophy as a major at the Faculty of Law and Literature, Keijo Imperial University (predecessor of Seoul National University). That period marks the time when philosophy came to be accepted by the mass media and public as a part of daily life, as well as the emergence of college graduates who majored in philosophy, and the return of those who studied abroad with their exposure to the discipline. There are many references pertaining to the period, which include personal writings, as well as newspaper and magazine articles that show the formation of the concept of philosophy. Modern mass media, that is, newspapers and magazines, are a source of useful information with which to understand the historical semantics of the concept. These sources reveal how philosophy became both an academic discipline and a knowledge

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4. To discuss universality as a concept presupposes the existence of individual beings. In this context, it is only individual beings that exist materially, and universality is merely an idea. The West imagined universality to be a byproduct of the modern history, and thereby generalized and ideologically constructed the Other, which had a material existence.

system, and was also constructed as a daily concept, in addition to other various patterns of the concept's formation.

## Translation and Accommodation

### *Translingual Movements of the Signifiers, Appropriation of the Signified*

Before the concept of “*cheolhak* 哲學” (philosophy) was established, there were a variety of signifiers and signified that denoted “philosophy.” When various meanings are homogenized within a linguistic field the signified is expressed by a certain signifier. When different languages and cultures interact, one first encounters the signifier, which has a meaning that is difficult to interpret and understand. Technically speaking, translation is the process of transcribing one culture's language into another culture's words, and it is also accompanied by an appropriation of the other's history and culture. This appropriation process is aptly demonstrated through the process of using and deciding on the translated noun “*cheolhak*” (philosophy). “Philosophia” is a Latin compound word (from the Greek) that combines *sophia*, which means wisdom, and *philo*, which means love, thus “love of wisdom.” *Cheolhak*—a term that was chosen as the translation of *philosophia*—is a concept that did not exist in the classical East Asian intellectual traditions. Rather, *cheolhak* (*zhexue* in Chinese; *tetsugaku* in Japanese) was a Chinese character term coined by Nishi Amane 西周 (1829-1897), a Japanese philosopher. Most Western concepts were translated into Chinese characters by the modern Japanese propagation of parts of Western civilization. At that time the translation of Western concepts was through a process of coining new words with Chinese characters. This procedure was also a process of reconstructing or deconstructing the traditional knowledge system (Koyasu 2008, 55). If you analyze salient documents about the early form of the words that were translated as the concept of philosophy, then one will ascertain there is another translation “*feilusufeiya* 費祿蘇非

亞” (*biroksobia* in Korean), a transliterated phonetically-based word for the concept; This can be gleaned from the following citation:<sup>5</sup>

In philosophia learning about the anima (soul) is the most beneficial and valuable. Saint Augustine said, “Philosophia boils down to two major themes, after all. One is about anima and the other about Deus” (Sambiasi 2007, 11-17).

Francesco Sambiasi (1582-1649) explicated the Scholastic philosophy of the soul, which Xu Guangqi 徐根光啟 documented into Chinese and published it under the title of *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠹勺 (Some Cursory Remarks on the Soul) in 1624 in Shanghai. The reason why a study of the soul and God became a philosophical subject was because St. Augustine regarded God as the origin of the truth that is instantiated in the soul. What is notable here is that philosophia was translated as *gewu qiongli* 格物窮理 (*gyeongmul gungni* in Korean; the investigation of things and the fathoming of principles). *Gewu qiongli* is derived from the concepts, *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知 (investigation of things and extending knowledge), *qiongli jinxing* 窮理盡性 (investigation of principles), and *jujing qiongli* 居敬窮理 (dwelling in reverence and plumbing principles [*li* 理]). Those concepts were a fundamental aspect of Confucian studies, as promulgated in the Chinese Song dynasty (960-1279), and were thus a method to learn the truth through the investigation of universal principles. In particular, the debate over the concept of *gewu qiongli* was considered to be of crucial importance in distinguishing the philosophy of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) from other schools of Neo-Confucianism.

During the flood of Western academic concepts into East Asia the controversies involving *philosophia* were not confined to translation issues about the very concept itself. The processes included an appropriation of the entire knowledge system of that time; this was even evi-

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5. According to Liu (1995, 368), “philosophy” is a borrowed word, transcribed in accordance with the phonetic value of the European word. It was also alternately transcribed as *feiluosufei* 菲洛素菲 or *feiluoshafei* 非羅沙非, and was finally replaced by *tetsugaku* 哲學, a Japanese-derived word for “philosophy.”

dent in the classification of *philosophia* as a subdiscipline of *xinxuewen* 新學問 (*sinhangmun* in Korean; meaning “new learning”). This categorization was intended to mitigate the impact of a cultural collision between the two different knowledge systems. Even before the translation issue could be considered, there was the salient question of which Western books were to be translated into Chinese for Christian missionary purposes—and sometimes these concepts were introduced under the rubric of *burulun* 補儒論 (*boyuron* in Korean; the idea of “complementing Confucianism”). However, its impact upon China and Korea culminated in the opening of new horizons of thinking. The question about the soul and God did not belong to the traditional East Asian conceptualization of learning, for *gewu qiongli* meant exclusively Confucian studies, of which the ultimate goals included the social harmonization of humanity (*ren* 仁 in Chinese; *in* in Korean) by inculcating in people the appropriate knowledge of righteousness.

*Philosophia* established itself in a knowledge system, while appropriating the dominant values of the day; the very understanding of it signified, as an inevitable consequence, a concomitant experience of a new culture. The translingual translation of Western philosophy initiated a collision and transformation of the signifiers and the signified. Granting this, it follows that “translation is no more an act of conveying meanings across the languages on the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent, and evident possibility of transcribing. The original text and its translated version complement each other to produce more than what a mere act of imitation or copying can produce” (Liu 2005, 41). In translingual practical processes, *feilusufeiya*, the phonetic loan and signified of *philosophia*, is replaced by *gewu qiongli*, the signifier of the concept; whereas the former became an archaic term.

### *The Constellation of Concepts before the Creation of the Term “Cheolhak”*

The East-West cultural interchanges at the beginning of the modern era caused a rupture in Korea’s traditional academic concepts. The traditional East Asian “learning” was denigrated and became a target of

criticism, thus it was subjected to radical revision and opposition—and was even abrogated by various modernist reform movements, for example, the Westernization Movement (洋務運動) and the Hundred Days Reform Movement (變法自強運動) in China, the Meiji Restoration (明治維新) in Japan, and the Enlightenment Movement (開化運動) and the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement (愛國啓蒙運動) in Korea. Consequently, the dominant view of learning in premodern East Asian societies underwent changes and the traditional concept of learning was also ruptured. Hence, the East Asian perception of *xuewen* 學問 (*hangmun* in Korean; meaning “learning”) rapidly began to change.

There had been an earlier attempt at knowledge reform in the late Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), that is, the Silhak (Practical Learning) movement, a movement that tried to distinguish its conceptualization of *hangmun* from that of Neo-Confucianism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, a paradigm shift in the meaning of *hangmun* occurred after the great influx of modern Western cultures, which changed the ultimate objective of *hangmun*, as well as its substance and methods. During the Korean Enlightenment Period several dominant discourses were catalyzed: the separation of the humanities from the natural and mathematical sciences, the rising importance of the technological sciences, the organization of learning into disciplines, and the rise of specialization within the disciplines. The momentous entry of modern Western science, humanist ideology, and empiricism intervened during this period and caused irreversible ruptures in traditional academic thinking.

Before *cheolhak* was established as the translated word for philosophy in Korea, there were words other than *biroksobia* 費祿蘇非亞 and *gyeongmul gungni jihak* 格物窮理之學 (a study to investigate things and principles) that were used to signify philosophy, such as *gyeokchi* 格致, *seongni* 性理, and *rihak* 理學. *Gyeongmul gungni* was split into two words, each denoting the same concept (Lee 2009). In 1889, Yu Gil-jun wrote the *Seoyu gyeonmun* 西遊見聞 (Observations on a Journey to the West), which is well known that he borrowed heavily from the *Seiyo jijo* 西洋事情 (Things Western) by Fukuzawa Yukichi. Yu Gil-jun referred to Socrates and Plato concerning ethics, and Aristotle on meta-



physics in a section of the *Seoyu gyeonmun*; he used Seongnihak 性理學 (Neo-Confucianism) as the translated term for the concept “philosophy,” as well as *gungnihak* 窮理學 (the study to investigate principles). In the *Seoyu gyeonmun*, Yu Gil-jun noted that “Isaac Newton’s ‘Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica,’ which leads us to the marvelous gate of a harmonious world with its understanding of the principles of all things, is deemed a masterpiece of *gungnihak*.” This section indicates how *gungnihak* was used as a signifier for both philosophy and physics. In addition to Newton, Hegel and Tyndale were classified under *gungnihak*, while Hamilton and Spencer were classified under Neo-Confucianism (Yu Gil-jun [1895] 1969, 329-332). In the aforementioned section where there was an explication about modern academic disciplines, physics was classified as a subdiscipline of *gyeongmulhak* 格物學 (a study to investigate things). In this section, *cheolhak* (philosophy) was used for the first time, in its specialized sense, to mean an independent academic discipline. Yu Gil-jun explained *cheolhak* as a concept, “to love wisdom and gain a command of universal principles. It is impossible to limit on its unfathomable depth and infinite use. It is a study of the discourses on human behavior and ethics and also on the movements of all things” (Yu Gil-jun [1895] 1969, 351).

“Science, in the generic sense” was translated as *suhak* 數學, “philosophy” as *rihak* 理學, and “physical science” as *gyeokchihak* 格致學 in the 8th issue of the *Sinhak wolbo* (Monthly Magazine on Christian Theology), a Methodist monthly magazine that was published in 1901. More terms from Western academia, such as conception (*gaenyeomnyeok* 概念力), logic (*nollihak* 論理學), science (*gwahak* 科學), and ethics (*susinhak* 修身學), were also later introduced by the 12th issue of the *Sinhak wolbo* (1901). Thus, one can ascertain that *gyeokchi(hak)* and *gyeongmul(hak)* had meant philosophy or natural science (physics) in the early 1900s.

It is difficult to know all of the causes of the changes in nature, but a deeper analysis reveals an order underlying it. As this order cannot be understood without the presupposition of a universal law, the greatest philosophers (*rihakga* 理學家) might be considered men of

religion (Yu Geun 1907, 25).

Since the opening of our country's ports, after observing how the West became rich and strong I concluded that everything was based on *gyeongmulhak*. Their academic disciplines of *gyeongmul* were astrophysics, geology, chemistry, aerodynamics, optical science, astronomy, barology, electrology, etc. Chemistry is where we learn the nature and effects of all things. . . . This knowledge was found by *gyeokchi* and all of the compounds of the earth are composed of 72 kinds of chemical elements (Yeo 1908, 12-14).

*Rihakga* (理學家) and *gyeokchiga* 格致家 are used to characterize philosophers who aver that philosophy and religion are interrelated (Yeo, 1908, 12-14, first paragraph quoted above). *Gyeongmulhak* refers to the entire domain of natural science, and *gyeokchi* connoted the method for research. Both *gyeongmu* and *gyeokchi* mean a way of investigating the principles of nature, but *gyeokchi* has more philosophical connotations in the aforementioned examples, *gyeongmulhak* and *gyeokchiga*. It is worth noting that the concept “*cheolhak*” (philosophy) was used earlier in the 1890s. It follows that *gyeongmul*, *gyeokchi*, and *cheolhak* were competing translations for “philosophy.”

In the extant records of the mass media, the word “*cheolhak*” first appears in an 1896 article, *Beomnyul jeogyo chonghwa* 法律摘要叢話 (Legal Summaries: Assorted Writings), which was published in the second issue of the *Daejoseon dongnip hyeophoebo* (Bulletin of the Independence Club of the Greater Joseon) on December 15, 1896. This was an article that explicated the positive law in order to educate readers; *cheolhak* was used to explain the philosophy of the Stoic school and the principles of philosophy. *Cheolhak* also was used in another article, “Hanmunja-wa gungmunja-ui sonik yeoha” (About the Merits and Demerits of Chinese Characters and the Korean Alphabet) by Shin Hae-yeong in the 15th issue of the *Daejoseon dongnip hyeophoebo*. In this article *cheolhak* signified a name of an academic discipline, for example, “philosophy, poetics, literature, and others were coined”; and “philosophy, algebra, physics, and chemistry were constructed.” It is possible to conjecture about the conventional usage of the new acade-

mic idiom in the early 1900s from an analysis of the newspaper reviews and advertisements about new books. For example, the *Hwangseong sinmun* (Capital Gazette) edition of June 8, 1906 ran advertisements on books of history, geography, politics, law, philosophy, society, economics, and references published by academic and vocational schools, as well as books by individual writers, in addition to various textbooks.

The terms *cheolli* 哲理 and *cheolhak* 哲學 both signified philosophy, with *cheolli* appearing in the main heading of the advertisements and *cheolhak* in the article about the book under the heading. The various aforementioned books were classified as “philosophical” and appeared in the advertisement section of the newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Among them, *Samdae cheolhakga hakseol* (Three Great Philosophers’ Theories) and *Cheolhak nongang* (Lectures on Philosophy) appeared several times in book advertisements. Philosophy and science were not sharply distinguished from each other; this convention can be inferred from, for example, the classification of books on Darwinian evolutionary theory as philosophical book advertisements. This case is similar to the usage of *gyeok-*

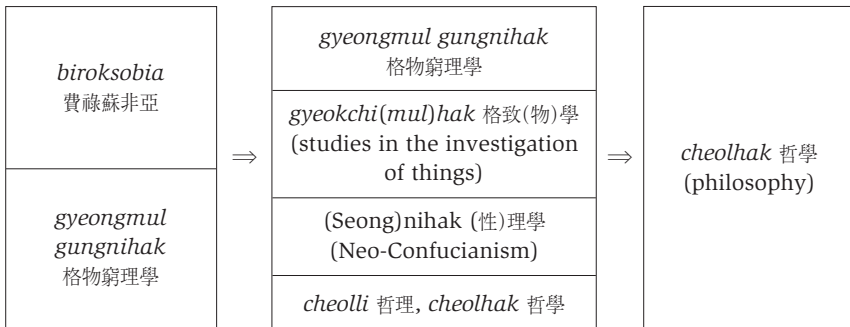
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6. They are *Cheolhak yeongyo* 哲學領要 (Essentials of Philosophy), *Cheolhak sinjeon* 哲學新詮 (New Explanations of Philosophy), *Mirae segyeron* 未來世界論 (A Discussion of the Future World), *Ibaengnyeonthuji oin* 二百年後之吾人 (Human Beings 200 Years from Now), *Gieoksul* 記憶術 (The Art of Memory), *Darimun cheontaekpyeon* 達爾文天擇篇 (Darwin’s *Natural Selection*), *Darimun muljongyurae* 達爾文物種由來 (Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*), *Jiguji gwageo mirae* 地球之過去未來 (The Past and Future of the Earth), *Saengmulji gwageo mirae* 生物之過去未來 (The Past and Future of Living Creatures), *Cheolhak yogoe baekdam* 哲學妖怪百談 (Philosophy’s 100 Mysterious Stories), *Sok cheolhak yogoe baekdam* 續哲學妖怪百談 (Sequel to Philosophy’s 100 Mysterious Stories), *O Gyeong-gyeong jeolbon cheonyeonnon* 吳京卿節本天演論 (Abridged Version of Evolution Theory by O Gyeong-gyeong), *Cheontaek mulgyeongnon* 天擇物競論 (Theory of Natural Selection, Struggle for Existence), *Cheonyeonnon* 天演論 (Evolutionary Theory), *Dodeok beomnyul jinhwajiri* 道德法律進化之理 (The Evolutionary Principle of Morality and Laws), *Samdae cheolhakga hakseol* 三大哲學家學說 (Three Great Philosophers’ Theories), *Rihak guhyeon* 理學鉤玄 (Research on Scientific Truth), and *Cheolhak nongang* 哲學論綱 (Lectures on Philosophy). See *Hwangseong sinmun* (Capital Gazette), “Bongwan-esy eo balsu-hanan gakjong gyogwaseo-nan ilja gak sinmun-e gwangpo-haya” (All Kinds of Textbooks Issued by This Publishing House Are Put on Notice at All Dailies), June 8, 1906.

*chi* and *gungni*, which were interchangeably used along with *cheolhak* (philosophy). One can find examples of such usage in the following remarks: “Greek philosophy has been helpful for the practice of *gyeokchi* for thousands of years as it taught us the principle of harmony for all things in the cosmos” (Namgung 1908, 1-2); and “philosophy as a part of learning *gungni*, which is above all, a higher form of learning whose goal is to research cosmic principles and to foster a wise mind with a study of the realm beyond human understanding.”<sup>7</sup> What was called *rihak* in the traditional knowledge system meant Neo-Confucianism, which sought to ascertain a proper path for human beings from the Universal laws. The term *rihak* had been used to translate the term “philosophy” in the earlier introduction period of Western philosophy, but it came to signify the natural sciences in the mid-1910s (Choe 1917, 53). The term for “philosophy,” which initially had multivalent meanings in various disciplines (e.g., philosophy, physics, chemistry, and ethics), eventually became more univalent, that is, *cheolhak*.

*Cheolhak* (philosophy) is not the only case in which the translation of a Western academic discipline’s name involved much learned discussion. Choe Nam-seon observed, “China had the upper hand over

Figure 1. Competing Terms for a Translation of “Philosophy”



7. Jang Ji-yeon, “Cheolhakga-ui allyeok” (Philosophers’ Insights), *Hwangseong sinmun* (Capital Gazette), November 24, 1909.

Japan in translating Western academic books into Asian terms, thus it was the Chinese that began that translation work for the first time. As a result, economics was called *saenggyehak* (生計學), sociology *daedonghak* (大同學), and philosophy *seongnihak* (Neo-Confucianism), which gives us clue that that Western academic disciplines were introduced through such concepts” (Choe 1973, 439-440). The process of translation might involve various factors, such as convenience in pronunciation, popularity of the translated word, and sociopolitical factors. However, with the full-fledged colonization of Korea by the imperialist Japanese, the main channel for the acceptance of Western science became Imperial Japan. Thus, in the end, sociopolitical factors became overwhelmingly predominant in relation to other ones.

Until the early 1900s Western philosophy was introduced to Korea through China, but most modern academic terms were determined by Imperial Japan, which became the arbiter of Western civilization by obtaining hegemonic power in East Asia. The procedure of constructing modern academic terms was a rupture and transformation of the traditional knowledge system, and forced the traditional system to mutate into a modern system. This power-knowledge reconfiguration also initiated a transition in the modes of thinking. However, these processes were ultimately connected to colonialism and its legacy, as it took place in the absence of freedom for independent thinking and criticism under the period of totalitarian Japanese colonial rule.

## Field of Meaning and Discourses of *Cheolhak* (Philosophy)

### *“Philosophy” and the Traditional Knowledge System*

East Asia had been dominated by Sinocentrism in the premodern era. In general, the Western academic concept of “philosophy” was quite alien to the intellectual traditions of East Asia. Consequently, the “acceptance” of these new concepts caused ruptures and reconfigurations of the traditional intellectual system. Since the emergence of European dominance over the world and after its encounters with

Western countries East Asia was marginalized to the periphery. The influence of Western culture, which initiated changes in the world-views of East Asian peoples, also had far-reaching changes in their individual lives and sociocultural spheres. In the sixteenth century, the Western knowledge introduced into Korea was regarded as heretical because it was ideologically far removed from the ideas of Chinese civilization. However, in the nineteenth century, Western knowledge came to be viewed as a source of practical learning and an impetus that gave rise to a new civilization (Shin 1908, 8). The notion of “Eastern Ways, Western Instruments” (*dongdo seogi* 東道西器)—a syncretistic idea of adopting Western technology while maintaining Eastern principles based on its cultural heritage—started to lose ground as colonial rule took concrete shape in Korea. Modern Western civilization became the object of learning, and the new learning that emerged was a key means for national survival in the Korean society of that time. Finally, modern Western civilization became the new norm with which to reconstruct and reconfigure the entire social strata.

Kim Taek-yeong deplored the fact that the Chinese devalued their own Confucian tradition and stated, “They claim that the teachings of Confucius are despotic and incompatible with a republic, argue for the equal treatment of Confucius with other sages, and regard it as a philosophy not a religion.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Kim describes philosophy as falling short of the notion of religion. As seen here, the West not only justified Western domination over the rest of the world through their “history,” but also made it possible for the West to appropriate the “other” by the means of its power-knowledge discourses. Accordingly, generalization of such Western-centered “history” subjugated other social and epistemological modes under the Western ones, thus turning the other

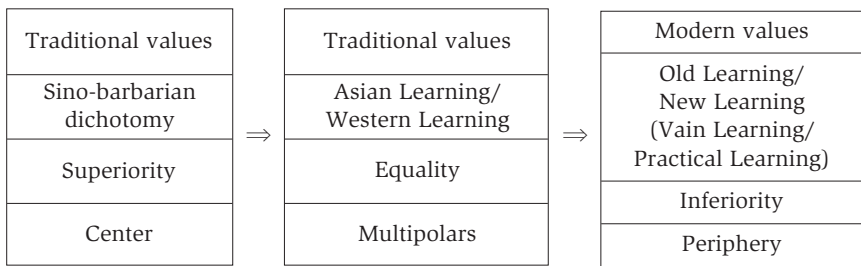
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8. Kim Taek-yeong, “Sayang seosilgi 泗陽書室記” (A Note on Sayang Reading Room), in *Sohodangjip* 韶濩堂集 (Collected Works of Sohodong), vol. 5. Aside from this, the terms related to philosophy and philosophers are confirmed to be used in the followings: Kim Yun-sik, “Yeonanjip seo 燕巖集序” (Preface to the Collected Works of Yeon-am), in *Unyangjip* (Collected Works of Unyang), vol. 10; and Jeon U, “Yangjipjeseolbyeon” (Discussion on Liang Qichao’s Thoughts), in *Ganjaejip* (Collected Works of Ganjae), vol. 1.

modes into an “insufficient knowledge system” represented by old learning, old thoughts, and useless learning (Duara 1995).

The state of Confucianism at that time can be compared to a patient laid on a Procrustean bed. Some conjectured that the study of the *ri* 理 principle (主理學) was connected to the cultural backwardness that was associated with the East, while others attributed the advancement of the West to the study of the *gi* 氣 (*jugihak* 主氣學). Thus there emerged denunciations of East Asian learning as a futile discipline, and Western learning came to be called the learning of the true literati (S. Kim 1908, 41-42). Joseon scholars deplored the idea that Eastern learning ended up deluding people with its *yin* and *yang*, or heaven and humanity principles, even though *gyeokchi* 格致 (*gezhi* in Chinese; meaning “the method of investigation of things”) was written about in the *Daxue* (The Great Learning) and there were numerous references by The Hundred Schools of Thought (M. Kim 1908, 29-32).

Figure 2. Changes and Reconfiguration of the Traditional Knowledge System



On the other hand, there were active movements based on modern values that reconstructed the traditional knowledge system. Yi Jeong-jik (pen name: Seokjeong 石亭, 1841-1910), who is regarded as the first Korean scholar of Western philosophy, interpreted the Kantian concept of freedom as a fundamental aspect of Neo-Confucianism and compared the Kantian categorical imperative of “treating others as ends in themselves and not as means to an end” to the Confucian concept of “humanity” (*ren* 仁 in Chinese; *in* in Korean) in his *Baegun hakseol* 倍

根學說 (Bacon's Theories) and *Gangssi cheolhakseol daeryak* 康氏哲學說大略 (Brief Explanations of Kantian Philosophy).

Yi In-jae (pen name: *Seongwa* 省窩, 1870-1929) attempted to find the causes for the development of Western civilization in Western philosophy. In his *Godae huirap cheolhak gobyeon* 古代希臘哲學攷辨 (Discussion on Ancient Greek Philosophy), he introduced many Western philosophers (e.g., Thales and Zeno of the Stoic school) and discussed each of them, and devoted a large part of his book to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He interpreted Socrates' notion of the gods as a Natural Law principle (*cheolli* 天理) and ethereality of *gi* (material force), whereas he criticized Plato's theory of Ideas for dividing ideas into two types, an idea of individual things and the idea that produced individual things. His analysis revealed his intention to prove the superiority of Neo-Confucianism and the universality of Confucianism as a form of learning (I. Yi 1980, 265-389).

Scholars also interpreted Western philosophy from the Buddhist perspective, in addition to a Neo-Confucian point of view. One example is the "Seocheolgangdeok *gyeokchihakseol* 西哲康德格致學說" (Theories of the Western Philosopher Kant), which was printed in a Buddhist monthly, *Bulgyo jinheunghoe wolbo* 佛教振興會月報 (Buddhism Promotion Society Monthly) in seven installments. Kantian philosophy was analyzed from the perspective of Yogacara Buddhism, but was not a mere introductory translation of Kant's philosophy.<sup>9</sup> This article was written in a combination of Chinese characters and Korean; the author set out to prove that Buddhist and Kantian notions of consciousness were compatible. In its explication of cognitive processes, the five senses (五官) and understanding (悟性) were compared to the five sense-consciousnesses (前五識) and wisdom (智慧) to the sixth consciousness (第六識) in the Lankavatara Sutra. Francis Bacon's empiricist inductivism was translated as *gwahakbeop* 科學法 (scientific method) and Descartes's methodological skepticism as *churi* 推理 (reasoning). Kant's *Critique of*

9. See Yang Geon-sik, trans. "Seoyang gangdeok gyeokchi hakseol" (Western Theories on the Investigation of Things), *Bulgyo jinheunghoe wolbo* (Monthly Publication of the Buddhism Promotion Society) 1 (1915).



*Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* were translated as *Sun-seongjihyeji geomjeom* 純性智慧之檢點 and *Silhaengjihyeji geomjeom* 實行智慧之檢點, respectively; the former was characterized as secular philosophy and the latter as moral philosophy. Immanuel Kant was considered to be a scholar who had a command of both secular and moral philosophy, thus demonstrating his synthesis of diverse philosophical concepts. It is also noteworthy that there was a comparison between Zhu Xi and Kant from a Buddhist perspective.

However, under Japanese colonial rule scholars found it difficult to maintain their intellectual independence while interpreting Western philosophy and also endeavoring to expand autonomous thinking. This was because the “new learning,” which was once a means for the recovery of national sovereignty and the advancement of civilization, was forcibly transplanted by the Japanese colonialists and was also manipulated to strengthen their colonial rule, thereby eliminating the space for autonomous thinking. Japanese became the official language of academia and scholars needed to learn the language of the imperial state in order to fight against it; this irony testifies to the common fetters from which the colonies in the modern era had to struggle to escape.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between imperialist states and their colonies shows two aspects of the production and strengthening of the modern world system. As colonization proceeded, the relationship between the two knowledge systems was completely reconfigured. The “local knowledge” of the colonized society was reinterpreted and expressed in terms of national or global knowledge systems, contrary to the earlier practice of interpreting foreign knowledge in terms of the local knowledge system (Morris-Suzuki 2002, 43-44). New terms such as *cheolhak* (philosophy), *bulgyo cheolhak* (Buddhist philosophy), and *yugyo cheolhak* (Confucian philosophy) are examples of how the traditional knowledge system was reconstructed within the discourse of Western philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

10. *Daehan maeil shinbo* (Korean Daily News), “Gyoyuk-ui majyang-ira” (On Educational Disciplines), February 19, 1908.

11. On the case of Confucian philosophy, see Kang (1921, 70), Anon. (1921, 70; 1921, 89-90), and B. Yi (1928, 8-9).

An example of this “mutual appropriation” of concepts and the knowledge system is An Hwak’s *Joseon cheolhak sasang gaegwan* (An Outline of the Philosophical Thinking of the Joseon Dynasty). It exemplified placing the entire knowledge system of the Joseon dynasty within the framework of Western philosophical thought. This introductory article is the first one on Joseon philosophy that was written in Hangeul (Korean alphabet) and was featured in the seventh issue of the *Sincheonji* (New World) magazine in November 1922. In earlier cases, Korean scholars compared the philosophy of the Joseon dynasty to Western philosophy with the intention of proving the superiority of Neo-Confucianism, and also sought a political compromise between the traditional Korean knowledge system and “philosophy” in its Western contexts. But they did not go to the extent of completely reconstructing the traditional knowledge system of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in terms of the Western philosophical knowledge system. There were attempts to reconfigure elements of the traditional knowledge into a system of modern Western academia, but they still confined themselves to the domain of Western philosophy, especially classical Greek, for example, the *Joseon bulgyo tongsa* (A General History of Korean Buddhism, 1918) by Yi Neung-hwa and the *Joseon yuhaksa* (A History of Korean Confucianism, 1922) by Hyeon Sangyun. In contrast, An Hwak’s *Joseon cheolhak sasang gaegwan* is significant because he provided a general overview of the traditional knowledge system based on philosophical concepts, and argued for its universality as modern learning, as well as making a case for the uniqueness of the Korean knowledge system.

An Hwak cited development in the fields of philosophy, ethics, and the political system as notable features in the history of Korean civilization. He noted that there was no official religion in Joseon dynasty’s approximately 500 years of history because the culture already emphasized ethics and being morality-oriented. He also thought that philosophy is of greater importance than politics and ethics. According to An, a distinctive feature of Korean philosophy, compared to its Western counterpart, was its orientation towards the concrete rather than the abstract, and emotion rather than reason.

Another distinctive feature of Korean philosophy is that it regards human beings and the universe as an inseparable whole.<sup>12</sup> But after the World Wars, East Asian intellectuals came to be skeptical about the intellectual bases of Western civilization and reconsidered their own traditional knowledge systems. The Western ideology regarding rights and individualism was subjected to criticism, and Western history was denigrated as a history of conflicts. This viewpoint led to the criticism that Western civilization did more harm than good for world peace, even though the efforts of Western philosophers contributed to the development of technologies and material success. From this viewpoint it was also thought that in some aspects Asian cultures were more intellectually advanced; one author argued that not until relatively recently did Western philosophy begin to discuss and value holism (e.g., soul and body, practical and ethical), which had already been established as philosophical issues in Asia as early as the Confucian era (Seol 1934, 109-110).

#### Cheolhak (*Philosophy*) and Gwahak (*Science*)

The term “*kakuchi* 科學” (*gwahak* in Korean) was used in Japan as a translation for “science” until the early Meiji era, but it also was used along with *gakka* 學科 (*hakgwa* in Korean), means “academic discipline,” or *gakumon* 學問 (*hangmun* in Korean), meaning “learning.” As a translation of “philosophy,” *cheolhak* came to enjoy a predominant position over other alternatives, such as *gyeokchi* and *gyeongmul*, which was partly because of the circumstances where they were used as a translation for “science.” It took a long time for *kakuchi* (science) to be established as a word with a meaning distinguished from that of “humanities,” partly because science represented the entire field of learning itself. The Confucian doctrines of *li* (*ri* in Korean; “principle”) and *ki* (*gi* in Korean; “material force”)—promulgated in the Chinese Song dynasty—incorporated natural history, which used to be part of the ancient knowledge of nature, into a larger knowledge system. This,

12. See Yi Tae-Jin et al. (1994, 40-41); and H. Park (2003).

in a sense, indicates the integration of the natural knowledge system into the framework of a morality-oriented Confucianism. Liang Qichao was not referring to “science” when he used *gezhi* (*gyeokchi* in Korean) in his *Gezhixue yange kaolue* (Historical Sketch of the Study of Investigation and Extension) published in 1902. After finishing his writing, however, he replaced *gezhi* with *kexue* (*gwahak* in Korean) in reference to the branch of learning and accepted the then existing convention of using *kexue* as a term for science.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the long history of the distinction between metaphysics and physics since Aristotle, the boundary between philosophy and science has not been so strict. In the medieval universities of the West, philosophy and science remained inseparable. The term “science” carried a broader meaning than the term does today; it signified systematic learning or intellectual activities in general. All domains of learning could have been called “science.” Philosophy was used in a far broader sense so that human knowledge and all kinds of learning could have been called philosophy (Y. Kim 2007, 86). Eventually in the West, philosophy and science were classified as separate academic disciplines. The decisive change came with the modern scientific (and technological) revolution, which distinguished the natural sciences from philosophy. Newton completed the summation of the Western scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, which further established a demarcation between human beings and nature. In his masterpiece, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, there was a canonical instantiation of the mechanical properties of Western modern science; he also invented a new field of “dynamics” to add to the then existing knowledge system of “material” and “movement.”

What kind of changes did the concepts of philosophy and science, which have undergone significant semantic changes for so long in the West, bring about in the course of their propagation to East Asia cultures? The “reception” of concepts, such as philosophy, was bound to involve a process of translation. Translation is mediated by the language, characters, history, and cultural traditions shared by the intel-

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13. See Jin and Ryu (2010, 388-396).

lectuals of that time. *Gyeokchi* is a representative case that exemplifies this mediation process. *Gyeokchi* was used as a translation for both philosophy and science, and the synthesis of these two fields alludes to the Confucian tradition of integrating knowledge and morality. As seen here, the meaning signified in the source language of the term *cheolhak* (philosophy) changed when it reached the target language. However, scholars in the recipient culture devised the translated term based on the existing conventional meaning of the concept, instead of incorporating historical changes into the semantics of the concept: changes that functioned as a mechanism to drive changes in society and the public consciousness. This movement, in which a concept becomes an element for social change (with an anticipatory public), is one of the traits found in peripheral countries that aspire for imperial power. For example, in Korea, starting around 1905, discourses involving philosophy and science erupted, bringing about changes to the scope of meaning for each concept, as well as to the knowledge system as a whole.

Yi Chang-hwan gave an overview of the historical changes in the concepts of philosophy and science and their semantic fields in his *Cheolhak-gwa gwahak-ui beomju* (The Categories of Philosophy and Science) (1908, esp. 16-18). According to Yi, natural phenomena used to belong in the category of philosophy in ancient times, when the causes of these phenomena remained beyond people's understanding. However as knowledge accrued, philosophy branched off into distinct subdisciplines such as metaphysics and psychology; these processes also were at work in science as physics and chemistry eventually became independent discourses. An interesting point here is that the author holds that the scope of philosophy was enlarged, even though science was separated from philosophy because of academic developments. With the advent of late modernity and the further development of academic disciplines, the separation between philosophy and science became more pronounced. As they developed their own research methods and acquired separate disciplinary identities various fields of study did not remain within the preexisting categories. Yi thought that the scope of philosophy was enlarged, whereas later it was argued that it was diminished because of the "progress" of science; this argument

is from a more holistic point of view, which is not restricted to the issues of philosophy and science as conceptual categories. The inventions of experimental tools, such as the observatory, along with the achievements made through them, reconstructed the thousand-year-old knowledge system. With the purported shrinkage of the unknown domains, the known world is greater and became more knowable, relative to scientific development. Yet, the expanded cognitive terrain exposed even more areas that remained to be explored. Yi averred that the scope of philosophy was expanded, instead of shrinking, because of the recognition of the limitations of cognitive power in spite of scientific development. It is here that philosophy can function to supplement science.

The “Jehak seongmyeong jeoryo 諸學釋名節要” (Digested Explanations of Various Titles of Academic Disciplines)<sup>14</sup> defined science as a field of learning with a systematic academic principle. In this article, science does not signify only the natural sciences in a narrow sense. The notion of systematic academic principles refers to a body of discursive knowledge practices, that is, a system of learning in a broader sense. Objects of study make up both facts and principles. The study of “facts” inductively produces knowledge, derived by means of observations, experiments, and causal principles, whereas the study of principles uses deductive processes, starting from universal principles and truths, to produce knowledge. The subdisciplinary nature of science was noted, in relation to how to categorize philosophy. Science is classified as both a formal and practical discipline. Mathematics belongs to the former. Practical science—which includes psychology, ethics, logics, politics, jurisprudence, sociology, pedagogy, mathematics, economics, and history—is then further classified as the natural sciences and the spiritual domain. Philosophy was excluded from science, since philosophy was seen as a study of principles and pure theory. Yi described what Japanese scholars called “philosophy” as the domain of theory. Here, philoso-

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14. “Jehak seongmyeong jeoryo 諸學釋名節要” (Digested Explanations of Various Titles of Academic Disciplines), *Seobuk hakhoe wolbo* (Monthly of the Northwest Academic Society) 11 (April 1909): pp. 8-11.

phy belongs in the domain of pure theory, and belongs neither to the spiritual realm nor the natural or formal sciences.

Science was seen not only as a driving force for advancement and development, but also as a fundamental element that constitutes the modern state (Y. Kim 1908, 9; Bak 1909; Agye 1909, 16). As science was legitimated as *Silhak* 實學 (Practical Learning), the traditional knowledge system was reconstructed according to the standards of science. Scholars also believed that science would usher in a new age by removing unscientific elements. An article entitled “Changes in the Thoughts of the Human Race and Values of Traditional Religions” (Im 1923, 19) made a clear distinction between science and philosophy by explaining the development of knowledge as a progression from religion to philosophy and from philosophy to science. A typical example of such “evolutionary” thinking is the argument that characterized ancient and medieval thinking as religious, the Renaissance until the eighteenth century as philosophical, and thinking since the eighteenth century as scientific. This evolutionary viewpoint is a variation of scientism that calls for the abolition of superstition.

*Yullihak* (Ethics) by Yi Hae-jo is an extreme example that showed the ideology of the modern self, which alienated itself from nature even as it utilized nature (H. Yi 1909, 28-30). In this respect, the adaptation of modern scientific thinking was the driving force behind self-help theory, which was popular in the 1920s. With the development of modern science and its purported cognitive power, nature became subject to human rule, although it was formerly an object of worship and awe. Science became tantamount to common sense, and was an educational necessity that was deemed an essential requirement for modern people, as well as an object for the management of the state and society. In short, the introduction of the concepts of philosophy and science catalyzed a change in the organic viewpoint that regarded human beings and nature as a unified whole; thus the traditional knowledge system that justified the humanitarian principle (*indo* 人道 in Korean) by means of the Natural Law principle (*cheolli* 天理 in Korean) was dismantled and thereby replaced with a new ethical system.

## Conclusion

The adaptation process of “philosophy” as a concept not only carved out a space for the new concept in the traditional knowledge system, but also transformed that traditional system into a modern one. The traditional Neo-Confucianism, which used to be regarded as a self-evident truth, was forced to prove its validity as a modern method of learning when confronted with the concept of Western philosophy. Neo-Confucianism faced the peril of degenerating into an archaic type of learning (舊學) or useless learning (虛學), unless it could reinvent itself as a science that dealt with “objective” truth.

*Gyeokchi* 格致, *gungni* 窮理, *seongni* 性理, and *cheolhak* 哲學 were interchangeably used for “philosophy” in the early period, when Western concepts were introduced into Korea. This phenomenon highlights the collision between traditional and modern knowledge, as well as its repercussions, in addition to the matter of translation. Independent interpretation and adaptation of the concept of Western philosophy were more actively pursued before the collapse of the traditional knowledge system; this interpretation usually involved accepting the new knowledge within the semantic parameters laid down by the traditional knowledge system. In the 1920s, Western philosophy was fully introduced under the Japanese colonial cultural practices, along with the return of those who studied abroad in Japan. However, this introduction was a mere forcible transplantation of the philosophy as interpreted and understood by the Imperial Japanese intelligentsia. The fact that philosophical concepts were “mediated” through the Imperial Japanese translations, with the Japanese style and idiosyncrasies reflected in the translation, meant that the identity and origins of philosophical concepts should be subjected to a critical review—even if one granted the convenience of utilizing Chinese characters that both Korea and Japan share. The issue of learning (philosophy) in the history of colonialism requires attention to the question of which aspect of the philosophy was accepted and what functions it had for the society, aside from the matter of the translation of individual terms.

The philosophical terms from the traditional knowledge system



were in a kind of “competition” with the newly translated terms; this was concomitant with the perpetuation of the Japanese colonialist ideology, as well as the establishment of the modern academic system that supplanted traditional knowledge. The opening of the Department of Philosophy at the Keijo Imperial University (predecessor of Seoul National University) was a watershed moment that brought an end to the continued production of meanings of traditional philosophy as a concept.

Modern Korean philosophy was established by the process of multilayered compromises between the traditional and modern world-views, between the universality and locality of knowledge, and between colonialism and anticolonialism. Though this process may be viewed as nothing more than the mere introduction of foreign knowledge, it exerted considerable influence on Korean academia, especially the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, the study of the historical semantics of academic concepts, including philosophy, is a part of the process of posing questions to the present day Korean humanities; and not limited to a history of Korean modernity as a distant past.

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