

# Reassessment of the Late Joseon Neo-Confucian Scholar Yi Ik's Attitude toward Western Learning: *With a Focus on His Perception of the Lord of Heaven\**

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## Abstract

*This article aims to investigate how Yi Ik, a late Joseon Neo-Confucian scholar, formed his view toward Christianity and the concept of the Lord of Heaven (Cheonju). Yi viewed Seohak (Western Learning) positively, but his attitude toward Christianity remained very selective. For instance, while he agreed with the Jesuits' claim that the biblical Lord of Heaven was equivalent to the Confucian Sangje, he rejected the ideas of heaven, hell, and spiritual immortality based on his Neo-Confucian convictions. Although Yi agreed with the Jesuit assertion that "the Lord of Heaven is the same as Sangje," he modified this concept of god according to his Neo-Confucian philosophy and perceived it as something analogous to the Principle of Heaven (cheolli). This essay will show that Yi's attention to Christianity originated from his academic objective of enriching the study of Neo-Confucianism. Therefore, the majority of scholars of Korean studies may need to reassess the established theory that Seohak motivated Yi Ik to go beyond Neo-Confucianism and advance toward modern Silhak (Practical Learning).*

**Keywords:** Yi Ik, Cheonju (Lord of Heaven), Sangje, Seohak (Western Learning), Silhak (Practical Learning), Seongnihak (Neo-Confucianism), modernity

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\* All English translated quotations from the primary sources are by Ahrum Yoo, with assistance of Ji-Hyun Lee, based on this writer's own Korean translation (and comparative proofreading) of the original texts.

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## Introduction

Most research endeavors on Yi Ik (1681–1763) focus on the modern aspects of his philosophy. As is already known, Yi Ik positively accommodated many religious and scientific concepts from the West (which henceforth will be comprehensively referred to by the original Korean term *Seohak* 西學, or “Western Learning”) and introduced them to his fellow Confucian literati through many of his writings. The majority of scholars of Korean studies have focused on Yi’s positive attitude toward *Seohak*, considering this as evidence of his orientation toward modernism. Attempts to excavate traces of modernity in Yi Ik’s philosophy began during the the Japanese colonial period by certain scholars of Korean history. These historians appraised Yi Ik as a “radical progressive” and defined his philosophy as “a transitional philosophy in between *Seongnihak* 性理學 (Neo-Confucianism) and *Silhak* 實學 (Practical Learning).”<sup>1</sup> This established perspective persisted among many philosophy scholars who joined in the study of Yi Ik from the 1980s and onwards. Some have even asserted that Yi Ik’s philosophy was formed and developed as an antithesis to preexisting Neo-Confucian views.<sup>2</sup> Many recent studies on Yi Ik and his attitude toward *Seohak* still agree with such earlier conclusions made by scholars in the fields of history and philosophy.

Representative publications on Yi Ik’s attitude toward *Seohak* have been written by such scholars as Keum Jang-tae, Cha Gijin, Lim Boo Yeon, Don Baker, and Kawahara Hideki. Keum Jang-tae asserts that Yi Ik accepted many of the West’s scientific and ethical concepts, while completely

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1. The tendency to discern evidence of modernity in Yi Ik’s philosophy was found among historians during the Japanese occupation period (1910–1945). Representative scholars from this period include Hong I-seop and Yi Neung-hwa. These scholars attributed Joseon’s exclusion from the worldwide wave of economic development to the conservative faction’s Neo-Confucian dogmatism and its unreasonable adulation of Ming and prejudice against Qing China. Further, they mention Yi Ik as one of the few pioneering intellectuals who rejected such old-fashioned views. See N. Yi (1928, 3–4, 8–9) and Hong (1946, 237–241).

2. Yun Sa Sun is a notable scholar of philosophy from this period, and he accepted the pre-existing view that Yi Ik opposed Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism. See Yun (1976, 1–3).

rejecting its religious doctrines.<sup>3</sup> Keum also asserts that while Yi Ik was firmly grounded in the orthodox learning of Song Neo-Confucianist doctrines (Dohak 道學),<sup>4</sup> he pioneered the school of Silhak<sup>5</sup> and positively accommodated many Western concepts. In other words, while rejecting Western religious doctrines, which opposed Confucian doctrines, he accepted the useful and logical Western sciences and ethics with a Silhak spirit of openness and practicality (Keum 2000). This view of Yi Ik was inherited and further developed by later scholars, including Cha Gijin and Lim Boo Yeon. Lim Boo Yeon also asserted that Yi Ik had high regard for the practical value of Western sciences and ethics, rather than its religious doctrines, characterizing Yi's attitude toward Western philosophies as "selective reception" (Lim 2014). Cha Gijin also supported the earlier aca-

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3. Seohak (Western Learning) in its broadest sense includes all sorts of Western knowledge and can be roughly divided into Western sciences and the Western religion (i.e., Christianity), with the former termed *seogi* 西器 (Western technologies), and the latter *seogyo* 西教 (Western religion). In this essay, in referring to Seohak, I am primarily referencing the latter *seogyo*, or Western philosophies or ideas that were introduced to Joseon through the Chinese translation of the Catholic catechism. For further elaboration on the concept of Seohak, see Noh (1997, 121).
  4. The term Dohak (literally the "School of the [True] Way"; Daoxue in Chinese) here refers to Neo-Confucianism (Seongnihak) established by Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Cheng Yi 程頤. Although the term Dohak is used synonymously with Seongnihak, its nuance is slightly distinctive as it implies Confucian intellectuals' aim to regain Confucian legitimacy. For elaboration on this term, see Y. Yi (2003, 34–36).
  5. The term Silhak, or "practical science," is an antonym of Heohak 虛學, or "impractical philosophy," the latter of which offered no real practical value to people's lives. In the realm of Korean studies, the term Silhak refers to those other studies which were the opposite of the "impractical philosophy" of Seongnihak. For instance, the majority of Korean studies scholars place Yangming Learning, Evidential Learning, and Western Learning (to include all Western knowledge such as Christianity, astrology, geography, mathematics, medicine and other sciences) under the same umbrella term, Silhak, which either opposed or supplemented Seongnihak. Further, the philosophies of those who favorably adopted such practical studies were all considered to part of the Silhak school. This academic categorization of anything anti-Seongnihak as Silhak, and Silhak as a "modern studies," has been maintained for over half a century. Recently, various attempts have been made to reconsider such an established understanding of Silhak and the usage of such terminology. Among Korean studies scholars, the debate is ongoing as to how exactly redefine the term Silhak.

demical view that the reception of Western philosophies in Joseon at this time reflected the practical trend among Confucian intellectuals seeking to overcome the limitations of Neo-Confucianism, and that Yi Ik was in the midst of such a trend. Based on more detailed analysis of Yi Ik's views of Western philosophies, Cha then demonstrated that Yi maintained a positive stance toward Christianity. For instance, he approved of the character of the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, acknowledged the claim that Christianity could supplement Confucianism, and positively viewed the theory of three divisions of soul.<sup>6</sup> All of these aforementioned scholars maintained the existing viewpoint that Yi Ik's philosophy was something of a transition between Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning.

On the other hand, taking a different stance from that of the aforementioned scholars, non-Korean scholars, including Don Baker and Kawahara Hideki, have refrained from characterizing Yi Ik's philosophy as "modern-minded" in their examinations of the characteristics of Yi Ik's academic interests and philosophical views. Don Baker focused on Yi's perception of Christianity and showed how strongly Yi refused Western religious doctrines based on his Neo-Confucian views (Baker 1997). Kawahara Hideki's research also placed Yi Ik amidst the Neo-Confucian tradition and viewed his limited acceptance of Christianity as an attempt to supplement the weaknesses of such a tradition. Kawahara's academic interest differed from that of Baker in that the former focused on Yi Ik's attitude toward the Western sciences rather than Christian doctrines. Nevertheless, Kawahara similarly viewed Yi Ik as a representative Neo-Confucian scholar who sought flexibility in Neo-Confucianism, because he explored the sciences of both the East and the West while modifying the latter based on his knowledge of the former and Neo-Confucianism (Kawahara 2013). I generally agree with Baker and Kawahara. Rather than focusing on the modern characteristics of Yi Ik's philosophy, I would like to discuss the attitude Yi Ik developed as he tried to understand Seohak and digested the concept of Cheonju (Lord of Heaven).

In fact, as these studies have observed, Yi Ik's writings on Seohak

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6. *Tres animae*, or *samhonseol* 三魂說 in Korean. See Cha (2013).

reveal a positive attitude toward the Western sciences and ethics on the one hand, and a mostly negative stance toward the Christian doctrines on the other.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Yi Ik's selective stance toward Seohak can be found in Sin Hu-dam's accounts after meeting with Yi Ik.<sup>8</sup>

In his accounts, Yi appraises the Western sciences and technologies, including astrology,<sup>9</sup> and even agrees with some of the Western religious doctrines. At the same time, however, he criticizes the major Christian concepts of heaven, hell, and the incarnation of Jesus, and rejects its accounts of various miracles.<sup>10</sup>

A closer examination of Yi Ik's views of the Christian religion reveals that he selectively accepted some of its doctrines based on his knowledge of existing traditions. For example, he determines the credibility of the Christian doctrines on the basis of the Confucian classics. He then reanalyzes those that pass this initial test with his Neo-Confucian philosophy. From this perspective, the Christian doctrines were an "intellectual resource" that helped him to enrich his own Neo-Confucian theoretical structure. By such an interpretation, it would seem that Yi Ik's philosophical acceptance of Seohak was not necessarily meant to overcome the limitations of Neo-Confucianism, but rather as a meaningful completion of it. This essay will further explore this point by refraining from the established perspective that sees Yi Ik's philosophy as a *transitional philosophy* between Neo-Confucianism and Silhak, and instead examine the process and logic behind Yi Ik's selective acceptance of some Seohak doctrines. If these Western concepts did help Yi Ik to complement his philosophical system, we should reconsider the current academic tendency to link Yi Ik's philosophy with modernism.

The sources will demonstrate how Yi Ik largely acknowledged the core concepts in the Western religion but rejected those of its doctrines that developed later. Yi Ik viewed Christianity serving Cheonju 天主 (Lord of

7. See Baker (1997); Keum (2001); and Cha (2013).

8. Regarding Sin Hu-dam's criticisms of Seohak, see Keum (2001); Seo (2001); and Kang (2003).

9. "Gimun pyeon 紀聞編" (Accounts of My Hearing), in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

10. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

Heaven; Tianzhu in Chinese) to be in essence equivalent to Confucianism serving Sangje 上帝 (Lord on High; Shangdi in Chinese). Further, Yi Ik's criticism was not directed toward the Christian doctrine in its entirety, but rather toward some of the heretical and perverted ideas that developed in the later period of Christianity's history. If some of the Western religious doctrines were screened through Yi Ik's cognitive filtering system in such systematic fashion, then it is possible that they were integrated into his theory structure as well. If we can ascertain the existence of such a selective integration process, we will see clearly how the alien philosophy of the West was absorbed and embedded in the soil of Yi Ik's philosophical system.

### Examining Yi Ik's Stance toward Seohak: With a Focus on Christianity

#### *Selection and Modification*

Representative documents that reveal Yi Ik's views toward Seohak include: Sin Hu-dam's accounts of his correspondence with Yi Ik for about three years from 1724 (hereafter, "Accounts");<sup>11</sup> his "Bal cheonju sirui 跋天主實義" (Postscript to *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*); and his review of *Qike* 七克 (The Seven Victories over the Seven Capital Sins). Let us first examine the "Accounts." The excerpt below is a part of Sin Hu-dam's account in the 7th lunar month of 1724:

Although the Western nations are located over eighty thousand miles away from China, all these Jesuit priests came sailing such a long distance with an aim to save the world and are not a bit deterred by longing [for their homeland]. Upon coming to China, they did not bow for government positions or accept imperial bounties, and edified the world while holding steadfast to their own ways. I came to think that the grandiosity of their goal and the wideness of their thinking are enough to surmount and move beyond the tenaciousness, stinginess, vulgarity, and narrow-mind-

11. The letters are compiled as a chapter titled, "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

edness of the world, and the selfish and calculated relationships among people. Although some people may argue that the real reason for their coming from such a distant land is to endanger the world by spreading false teaching, I will, by my every word, defend their cause.<sup>12</sup>

In the above account, Yi Ik evaluates highly the character of the Jesuit priests as well as their aim for the world's salvation. Elsewhere in Sin's account, Yi Ik calls Matteo Ricci a sage,<sup>13</sup> and declares his intention to defend the truthfulness of these Jesuit priests and their dogma against those who would doubt or criticize them. Although Yi Ik showed a favorable attitude toward the Jesuits, this does not mean he acknowledged and accepted as true their philosophy as a whole. His view toward the theories of heaven, hell, and Jesus' incarnation approaches criticism:

Let me add the following point for your understanding. Such claims by Western philosophy as the existence of heaven and hell are indeed not far from the false teachings of Buddha. . . . However, their theory of heaven and hell simply shows that they have not yet discovered the true path, and not that they intend to deceive the world as the Buddhists.<sup>14</sup>

Yi Ik continues:

How could these Westerners carry such an evil aim to deceive the world and people? I think they just harbor a rather excessive belief in ghostly things (*gwisin*). . . . Although their claims regarding the heavenly god [such as the theories of Jesus' incarnation, miracles and ascension] are indeed nonsense, how could they be committed to any illusive schemes?<sup>15</sup>

Yi Ik considers the theory of heaven and hell a false belief that has been distorted by Buddhism and therefore rejects it. However, upon close reading of the above account, we can find that such a conclusion is made on the basis of his overall positive attitude toward Seohak. Although the Christian

12. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

13. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

14. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

15. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

doctrines of heaven and hell or Jesus' incarnation appear to be nonsense, he claims that the Jesuit priests may have set off in a "wrong direction" in their philosophical pursuit or caused this "error" due to their rather excessive belief in ghosts. While Sin Hu-dam rejects all aspects of Seohak because of the religious concepts of heaven, hell, and so forth,<sup>16</sup> Yi Ik saw these concepts as the by-products of misdirected thinking and excessive belief, not willful deception. Such a tolerant attitude toward Seohak stems from Yi's premise that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity were consistent with the ancient Confucian classics. Yi's positive attitude toward the Western religion is also shown in his understanding of the godly authority, Sangje.

Those who encounter the theory of the [Christian] Lord of Heaven will be stunned to hear it, but through careful comparison of the surviving account of Sangje and *gwisin* 鬼神<sup>17</sup> in the Confucian classics [and the theory of the Lord of Heaven], some hidden similarities are found. This is why the Chinese literati who had rejected the Lord of Heaven theory were eventually persuaded to believe it. So the reason why you denounce this theory now may be because you have not thoroughly examined the entire aspect of Seohak.<sup>18</sup>

Yi Ik sees that the essence of the Western philosophy lies in the worship of the heavenly god,<sup>19</sup> and agrees with the Jesuit priests' assertion that the Sangje of the Confucian classics is in truth the same heavenly god. At least on the surface, he seems to acknowledge, and even concede to, the Jesuit interpretation of Sangje. Yi Ik then goes further to defend Western philosophy by explaining how the same heaven-worshipping practice in Confucianism and Christianity, but with variant names referring to the "heavenly

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16. Sin Hu-dam partly agrees with Yi Ik's assertion regarding the benefits of Western ideas, especially those of science and technology, but strongly rejects its religious doctrines. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

17. Yi Ik's reference of *gwisin* denotes something like a cluster of *gi* 氣 and mainly diverges from the current Western or Korean concept of ghosts in its perishability. Therefore, the untranslated term *gwisin* is used throughout this article, unless used for spirits of the deceased or to explain Western concepts.

18. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

19. "Gimun pyeon," in vol. 7 of *Habin seonsaeng jeonjip*.

god” (*cheonsin* 天神)— Sangje for the former and Lord of Heaven<sup>20</sup> for the latter—developed differently over time. In other words, Yi claims that the core concepts of the two philosophies used to be the same in the worship of heaven, but that Western philosophy diverged from those fundamentals because of “misinterpretations” by Western philosophers. Further details of Yi’s defense can be found in his “Bal cheonju sirui.”

Just as its title implies, this postscript (*balmun* 跋文) was a commentary Yi Ik wrote after reading Matteo Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven).<sup>21</sup> Yi Ik’s attitude toward Western philosophy in this piece of writing remains analogous to the one portrayed in Sin Hu-dam’s letters found in the “Accounts.” In a similar fashion to those accounts, Yi Ik declares the Lord of Heaven to be the same heavenly authority as Sangje of the ancient Confucian classics,<sup>22</sup> compliments the West’s advanced technologies and Matteo Ricci’s noble character,<sup>23</sup> and then denounces the theories of heaven, hell, spiritual immortality, and Jesus’ incarnation.<sup>24</sup> In this writing as well as in the “Accounts,” Yi Ik maintains a rather sympathetic and flexible view toward the theory of heaven and hell compared to that of Sin Hu-dam. If Sin Hu-dam completely rejected Christianity’s concept of heaven and hell as a deceptive and misleading superstition, Yi Ik takes a defensive stance and explains why such a deviation occurred in the later period of Christianity. In the “Accounts,” as explained earlier, Yi Ik maintained the stance that the theory of heaven and hell was a “misinterpretation” resulting from their excessive belief in god. In the “Bal cheonju sirui,” he expounds upon the reasons and processes by which such

20. Yi Ik, in such writings as “Salsaeng jecheon 殺生祭天” (Sacrifice for Heaven Worship) found in *Seongho saseol* (Miscellaneous Discussions of Seongho Yi Ik), uses the term *cheonsin* (heavenly god) in place of Sangje.

21. In *Tianzhu shiyi*, Ricci quotes Confucian classical texts as a basis for his assertion that the Confucian Sangje was analogous to the Christian Lord of Heaven. Such claim that Christianity could supplement Confucianism (補儒論) was integrated into the Jesuits’ missionary strategy.

22. “Bal cheonju sirui 跋天主實義” (Postscript to *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

23. “Bal cheonju sirui,” in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

24. “Bal cheonju sirui,” in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

an error occurred, in relation to how Sangje's influence in the world has weakened over time.

*Gwisin* [follow] the way of *yin* (*eumdo* 陰道) and men, the way of *yang* (*yangdo* 陽道). As people's lives become more complicated, the influence of *gwisin* weakens, and such is only a natural outcome. For instance, a day consists of the night of darkness (*eum* 陰) and day of light (*yang* 陽). As a result, *gwisin* appear at night while men work during the day. Even in the expanded [time span of] one whole length of the universe (*irwon* 一元), the same pattern will be found. We do find in stories and records that the godly principle (*silli* 神理) existed in the beginning of the world when humans had not yet come into being, and mysterious events occurred following the period people came to exist. Such traces are undeniably brought to light through the stories from the time of the Five Emperors and the Three Kings. As the virtuous received blessings and the degenerate ended in calamity, people obeyed recommendations and feared punishments. So abundant are such accounts in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Poetry) and the *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents) that they can never be fantasies or groundless nonsense. The current time is equivalent to a bright daytime which is minimally influenced by *gwisin*. However, people these days end up with their own interpretations, saying that the "so-called 'heavenly rewards and retribution' in the ancient classics is just a way of explaining how the *i* 理 (principle) works in the world, and is not originally based on reality." These people do not understand that the people of the ancient past wrote such contents based on real events.<sup>25</sup>

According to Yi Ik, the heavenly authority figure appearing in the Confucian classics, Sangje, is in essence the same as the Lord of Heaven. In Yi's understanding, Sangje listens and responds to people's prayers and influences their lives by "bestowing natural disasters (*jaei* 災異), rewards to the good, and punishments to the evil (*bokseon hwaenum* 福善禍淫)."<sup>26</sup> However,

25. "Bal cheonju sirui," in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

26. *Jaiei*, literally meaning natural calamity or unusual phenomena, are taken as heavenly warnings when people (including the Son of Heaven, i.e., the emperor) engage in evil thoughts or conduct. On the other hand, *bokseon hwaenum*, which literally means that the virtuous man receives heavenly reward while the evil man receives heavenly retribu-

as time passed, the “way of *yin*” through which the spiritual beings (*gwisin*) work in the world became weak, and therefore the means by which Sangje—or the Lord of Heaven—could influence the goodness and evil in people were greatly weakened. As the link between one’s conduct and the heaven-bestowed consequence was lost, the means and authority by which Sangje-Lord directed people’s thoughts and conducts were diminished. As people stopped revering Sangje-Lord, they became corrupt. The philosophers in China and the West later developed different doctrines in order to cope with such a problem of weakened causality, and as a result, Confucianism in China and Christianity in the West entered upon different paths. Now, let us examine the following passage:

Such observation reveals how the Western religious styles have been developed. I think that the customs of the West gradually changed in a direction of not responding to heavenly authority, and people lost reverence to and belief in the fate of heavenly rewards and retributions in accordance with their conduct. The teachings of the Bible (Cheonju-gyeong 天主經) came to exist for this reason. At first [the contents of the Bible] were more or less analogous to those of China’s classics, the *Shijing* and *Shujing*. However, lest the people should not follow these teachings, [the Western prophets] supplemented them with erroneous theories such as that of heaven and hell, which were then passed down to this day. The various spiritual miracles [which supposedly happened in the West] are no more than the deceptive deeds of the evil spirit which the Westerners refer to as Satan.<sup>27</sup>

Yi Ik then continues:

As the Chinese [sacred writings] only talked about actual events, when such events disappeared, people foolishly stopped believing [in Sangje]. In the West, [writings] spoke of absurdities, and the more absurd the story

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tion, is the idea that there is an inevitable relationship between one’s conduct and its consequences. Both ideas are ancient Confucian theories of heavenly intercession. Yi Ik’s interest in this theory was so great that he even wrote two pieces of writing, each titled “Jaei” and “Bokseon hwaem.”

27. “Bal cheonju sirui,” in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

became, the more fascinated with it did people become and they were led into delusion. The reason why evil could triumph in such a way is because Christianity had already misled the people. . . . All other ideas of the West are based on thorough investigation and are therefore highly sophisticated, but alas, they are pitifully stuck in this philosophy!”<sup>28</sup>

The problem in China was that people stopped believing in the existence of Sangje after his power to grant rewards and retributions had weakened. On the other hand, the problem in the West was that people started upon the wrong path by believing in hollow and baseless theories. It seems that Yi Ik felt deeply sorry that the errors of Christianity, such as the theory of heaven and hell, opened Western philosophy to misunderstanding and criticism. Yi Ik seems to think that the original, untainted principles of Seohak should be considered so that people would not reject or underestimate the thorough academic investigations made by the Western intellectuals.

This paper thus far has explored Yi Ik’s attitude toward Seohak, more specifically, the Western philosophy of Christianity. Agreeing with the Jesuits’ claim that Western philosophy could fill the gaps within Confucianism, he was certain that the Lord of Heaven of the Western Bible was synonymous with the Sangje of the Confucian classics. He explained how the Western philosophers had no other option but to establish erroneous theories of heaven and hell, and defended them by saying that their fundamental purpose was to save the world and lead people upon the right path. Therefore, Yi Ik saw that if such erroneous doctrines could be removed, the Western philosophy of the Jesuits and Confucianism could both be regarded as true philosophies that had inherited and maintained the ways of the ancient sages. Such thinking reveals Yi Ik’s much more positive attitude toward the Western philosophy compared to Sin Hu-dam. Nevertheless, Yi Ik’s selective accommodation of the Western religious doctrines does not mean that he entirely accepted Christianity as his own religious belief, as claimed by some in the generation of scholars that followed him.<sup>29</sup>

28. “Bal cheonju sirui,” in vol. 55 of *Seongho jeonjip*.

29. “Cheonhak mundap burok 天學問答附錄” (Appendix to “Dialogue on the Heavenly Learning”), in vol. 17 of *Sunamjip*.

Accepting Christianity as one's own religion means having conviction in the existence of the personal god, the Lord of Heaven, and accepting as truth all theories of heaven, hell, Jesus' incarnation, and spiritual immortality. However, with his strong roots in the Confucian traditions, Yi Ik selectively accommodated the Christian doctrine and modified it to form part of his knowledge system. In this regard, the theories of Western philosophy were no more than intellectual materials gathered to enrich his own knowledge. For instance, although Yi Ik, in his "Bal cheonju sirui," supported the Jesuit claim that "the Lord of Heaven is just another name of Sangje," Yi only offers a limited acknowledgement of the power of that godly figure. In other words, Yi Ik recognizes the Lord of Heaven as an equal of Sangje only in parts where his authority seems to overlap that of Sangje as described in the Confucian classics. He noted that the Lord of Heaven, just like Sangje, was able to maintain the world's peace and direct people toward goodness by controlling various phenomena in the world and by bestowing rewards and retributions upon people according to their conduct. With a similar comparative logic, he took as errors those other doctrines that diverged from the concept of Sangje or other doctrines that do not appear in the Confucian classics, such as the theory of heaven and hell.

In addition, because Yi Ik understood the Lord of Heaven only through his Confucian lens, and his knowledge of Sangje derived from the Confucian classics, he did not see this god as the figure who created the universe from nothing or as a personal god who revealed his emotions and will to people. In Yi's thinking, although the Lord of Heaven's primary role was to control disasters and bestow rewards and retributions, he did not do so as a personal god who feels pleased or enraged by men's conducts and metes out blessings or punishments accordingly. Yi Ik never accepted the view that the Lord of Heaven was a personal god, and only understood god's abilities to create and change the world and to influence people and nature within the bounds of Neo-Confucianism. If so, what logic was behind his understanding of the Lord of Heaven within the Neo-Confucian knowledge system? The following section will examine how Yi Ik understood the Lord of Heaven and his workings in a world founded upon the Neo-Confucian concepts of *i* 理 (principle; *li* in Chinese) and *gi* 氣 (material force or vital

force; *qi* in Chinese).<sup>30</sup>

### *Yi Ik's Perception of the Lord of Heaven*

In consideration of how Yi Ik accepted the Jesuit's accommodation theory, we will now examine his view of Sangje to determine how he understood the concept of the Lord of Heaven. To Yi Ik, Sangje and Lord of Heaven were different names referring to the same truth. He interpreted the concept of Sangje as the *cheolli* 天理 (principle of heaven; *tianli* in Chinese). The following is an excerpt from his writing, "Salsaeng jecheon 殺生祭天" (Sacrifice for Heaven Worship):

Heavenly god [is said to] descend upon the rites carried out in the open land, and the ghosts (*gwisin*) [are said to] receive the rites carried out in shrines, and people become ghosts upon death. Because people ate and drank while living, we set tables [for the deceased] with a good amount of sacrificial offering to serve them as when they were living. The god of heaven, however, refers to *i* 理 [meaning principle or reason], so why would *i* need food prepared to come upon the aroma of animal or grain sacrifices? I think such sacrifices do not mean much, since they are merely a way of offering things for humans to pay their respects to heaven, just as they pay respect to people.<sup>31</sup>

The term Yi Ik uses here, heavenly god (*cheonsin* 天神), means Sangje. Sangje, in turn, is the *cheolli*, principle of heaven. The concept of *cheolli* appears consistently throughout the entire theoretical structure of Neo-Confucianism, and it refers to all principles behind the workings of nature, consequences of good and evil deeds, and morality. Because *cheolli* is a universal principle within the Neo-Confucian tradition, it is not a personal being. Accordingly, *i* cannot engage in personal activities such as "descending upon"

30. The meaning of the terms *i* and *gi* are very inclusive and not easily translated into English. As no consensus exists on how to translate these words, many scholars just use the Chinese transliterations *li* and *qi* to express these concepts. For further explanation on these terms and their English translations, see Y. Kim (2000, 19–21, 27–28, 31–35, 39).

31. "Salsaeng jecheon," in vol. 1 of *Seongho saseol*.

or “smelling the aroma of food.” Therefore, how can Sangje in Yi Ik's understanding administer the birth and workings of the universe, communicate with humans, and bestow rewards and punishments?

Yi Ik redefined Sangje as *silli* 神理, or the godly principle, which, by combining with the *singwi* 神鬼, or godly ghost, could communicate with people, cause disasters, and bestow blessings and punishments.<sup>32</sup> Further, Yi Ik explained that the godly principle existed and worked in four different realms. In the first realm of nature, *silli* administers the creation, transformation, and organization of all things within the universe. In the second realm of self-maintenance, *silli* controls all beastly impulses, such as appetite and sexual desire. In the third realm of morality, *silli* supervises the virtuous impulses, such as the feeling of commiseration (惻隱之心). In the fourth realm of retributive justice, *silli* causes natural phenomena and bestows blessings or punishments in accordance with a person's conduct. Yi Ik further asserts that, in order to cause real phenomena in the world, *silli* unites with the godly ghost which is one of the many different types of *gi* within the universe. Taking note of the fact that Yi Ik paid special attention to the power to administer natural phenomena and bestow blessings and punishments upon people, among the varied abilities of the Confucian Sangje and the West's Lord of Heaven, this section will proceed to discuss the role of Sangje as the godly principle working through the rule of causality.

Within traditional Neo-Confucianism, there existed two rather different concepts: the concept of Sangje who distributes reward and punishment according to the rule of causality, and the concept of *cheolli* which is a rule of causality. The former was understood as a personal god who is enraged by evildoers and punishes them, while the latter was understood as a rule of causality dictating the result of good and bad actions. Yi Ik viewed the personal god Sangje as a rule of causality, which could effect

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32. The administration of real phenomena in nature and people's lives by the principle of heaven (*cheolli*) is not done through the power of a personal god, i.e., by ordering the godly ghosts (*singwi*) to cause them. Yi Ik defines *i* in two parts—its substance and action. The former refers to the universal existence of *i* itself, and the latter refers to some kind of energy through which *i* reveals itself in the world. Joseon's Confucian scholars long debated how exactly and with what scope *i* could exercise *gi*.

rewards and punishment through the workings of a type of *gi* called *sing-wi*.<sup>33</sup> In describing the characteristics of Sangje, Yi Ik introduces the concepts of godly principle and godly ghosts and creates a unique theory explaining how *i* and *gi* work. In doing so, he theorizes the exact mechanism through which Sangje enacts upon the rule of causality and brings about various phenomena in nature and people's lives according to their conduct. This essay will use the term, "theory of *i* and *gi* based on the concept of *gwisin*" to refer to the logic Yi Ik used to explain heavenly retributive justice. Let us first examine how Yi Ik describes the characteristics of *gwisin* in his "Silli jaesang 神理在上" (The Godly Principle of the Upper World).

*Gi* originates from heaven and materials originate from the earth, so all *gi* naturally ascend while all materials descend. . . . I am not only talking about the *gwisin* [ghosts] of the deceased but all kinds of beasts, insects, and plants. . . . When people or other living things die, they leave behind some residual *gi*. All *gi* must move upward but depending on their origins, they travel different distances. . . . *Gi* from dead plants or insects are the weakest of all and travel the shortest distance in the heavens. In the case of animals, their *gi* can travel a little farther. *Gi* left over from people can reach the greatest distance.<sup>34</sup>

When all forms of life including human beings die, their *gi* rise toward heaven and their bodies are buried in the earth. The distances travelled up by these *gi* vary among different life forms, because of their different purity levels and weights. Therefore, the purest and lightest *gi* emanating from human beings can reach the highest place. *Gi* from dead animals comes next, and *gi* from dead plants and insects cannot go too far. Further, Yi Ik asserted that each person's *gi* travels a different distance upward because

33. After Neo-Confucianism was introduced to Joseon, Confucian scholars tended to see Sangje not as a personal god but as a general principle, *cheolli*. However, some scholars, including Yi Hwang, Yun Hyu, Heo Mok, and Yi Ik, expressed Sangje as a personal god and asserted the importance of respecting him. As a Confucian scholar based in the Seoul region, Yi Ik inherited the scholarship of Yun Hyu and Heo Mok. In this regard, Yi's ideas may have received some influence from these predecessors. For further development of this idea, see D. Yi (2008) and H. Kim (2010).

34. "Silli jaesang 神理在上," in vol. 27 of *Seongho saseol*.

each person's *gi* differs from that of others in terms of purity and weight. Because the *gi* of the saints is the purest and lightest, it can attain the greatest distance. Then just how high can this *gi* go? To answer this question, Yi Ik reanalyzes the West's cosmology of nine-layered heavenly spheres (九重天說).

The sky is a realm lying above all land. The heavenly spheres enwrap the earth's surface in layers like onion, but the clear *gi* of each of these [spheres] cannot screen or shut out the others. Diviners take the sun, moon, and constellations as evidence of the existence of nine heavenly spheres, but the exact number of heavenly layers covering [the earth] is unknown. . . . [People] possess *gi* of different levels. Some can correspond with the celestial heaven (日星之天) during their life and end up in that place [after death], and these people are the saints. As mentioned in the *Shijing*, "King Wen ascends and descends, staying on the right and left sides of God (Sangje)." All other living things, too, rise up to their respective levels of heaven [after death] and remain there.<sup>35</sup>

Yi Ik mentions that heaven consists of layers resembling those in an "onion" based on his knowledge of the Western theory of nine-layered heavenly spheres.<sup>36</sup> As Yi Ik says that it is not certain how many layers exist, he may have acknowledged the 12-layered heaven theory or considered the possibility that even a greater number of layers existed.<sup>37</sup> He sees that the reason why *gi* from plants, insects, beasts, and humans rise to different levels is because they communicate with different spheres of heaven. *Gi* of smaller organisms correspond with the lower spheres of the heaven and become

35. "Silli jaesang," in vol. 27 of *Seongho saseol*.

36. The metaphorical use of "onion" (*chongdu* 蔥頭) was employed not only in describing the Western theory of layered heaven in particular, but also for explaining other theories concerning the general structure of the universe by scholars like Zhu Xi.

37. The 12-layered heaven theory, as introduced by Yi Ik, describes a geocentric universe structured with multiple spheres like layers of cloth. A total of 12-spheres, from the innermost sphere of the moon to the final "eternally immovable" sphere of saintly spirits, either stay still or move about at different speeds and in different directions around the earth. For further details on this theory, see "Sibijung cheon 十二重天" (12-Layered Heaven), in vol. 1 of *Seongho saseol yuseon*.

absorbed there after their death. On the other hand, *gi* of more complicated organisms, including human beings, can rise to the higher levels and their deconstruction happens much more slowly. Human beings with the greatest accomplishments, namely the saints, correspond with the highest level of the heaven and ultimately end up there. Sangje exists in this highest level of the heaven, which is called the “celestial sphere of the sun and stars” (*ilseong ji cheon* 日星之天).

Yi Ik says that this celestial sphere is the final destination for the *gi* of saints such as King Wen, and there the saints assist *cheolli*, the heavenly principle. Although the description in the *Shijing* that states the saint king “stays on the left and right side of God (Sangje)” obviously implies that Sangje or the godly ghosts (saints) are personal beings, this idea is then reinterpreted in the Neo-Confucian frame of thought, as Yi Ik’s theory of *gwisin* is in essence based on the Neo-Confucian theory of ghosts. This theory states that what we call *gwisin* are just interactions between the *gi* of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>38</sup> *Gwisin* are also conceptualized as a mixture of these two types of *gi*, some of which stay attached together for a short or long time. The stronger the bond, the stronger its power becomes, and this power disappears as the two *gi* again separate.<sup>39</sup>

Yi Ik adds that the ancestral ghosts with the noblest characters that reach and assist Sangje in the celestial sphere are those of the ancient sage kings. The *gi* of these saints, such as King Wen, are very pure and solidly united, and that its disappearance would be extremely slow:

*Gwisin* are the essence of *gi*. Because *gi* is destined to be diffused over time, *gwisin* have no way of lasting forever, and only the speed of their disappearance may differ. The *gwisin* of the saints are exceptional in nature and their speed of diffusion is the slowest. As a result, some of them may last for hundreds or thousands of years. Since such [a nature] does not exist in ordinary people, we can presume that different levels of *gi* exist among animals and plants as well.<sup>40</sup>

38. “*Gwisin* 鬼神” (Ghosts), in vol. 3 of *Seongho saseol*.

39. “*Sinseon-Iyu* 神仙二酉” (Immortals and Two You), in vol. 6 of *Seongho saseol*.

40. “*Silli jaesang*,” in vol. 27 of *Seongho saseol*.

As mentioned above, the *gi* of the saints has the highest purity and density, so it dissipates over a very long period of time. This type of *gi* is not just an interaction of *yin* and *yang*, but is capable of human perception that encompasses emotional senses and reasoning. Such *gi* can correspond with the human mind and carry out retributive justice by bestowing blessings or disaster. Yi Ik named the *gi* of the saints that assist Sangje in carrying out revelation and judgement as “godly ghosts” (*singwi*). These ghosts were formed in ancient times, and as they were combined with Sangje, they could immediately cause disaster, bring blessings, bestow punishments upon the world in accordance with Sangje’s command.

Sage kings ascended to the left and right sides of Heaven (Sangje), and these godly ghosts were responsible for bestowing blessings or giving warnings. . . . Consider a parable in which a generous king is sitting on his throne, not doing much work. As long as his subordinates obey his commands and administer the kingdom on his behalf, the world will see their actions as instruction by the king himself. In this end time, *silli* no longer has its former authority. Once the evil spirit (惡鬼) interfered to act against the right principle (正理), it seems that heaven can do nothing to resolve this problem.<sup>41</sup>

The command of heaven is the command of Sangje. However, Sangje does not directly cause disasters or judge the good and evil in men. The role of revelation and judgement was taken up by the “godly ghosts” who were once humans, possess human consciousness, and therefore can discern goodness from evil and select those to be blessed or cursed. Using the Neo-Confucian terminology, disastrous phenomena, blessings, and punishments are brought to this world through the godly ghosts (*singwi*) acting in accordance with the godly principle (*silli*) of retributive justice, or the *gi* functioning in accordance with the *i* of heaven (*cheolli*). To explain this point, Yi Ik talks about “a king who remains still [on his throne] and orders his subordinates to properly discern his commands and administer state affairs.”

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41. “Silli jaesang,” in vol. 27 of *Seongho saseol*.

As indicated in the chapter title of the quoted paragraph above, “Godly Principle of the Upper World,” Yi Ik saw *i* as the heavenly principle, or Sangje, and *gi* as the godly ghosts. Heaven’s active intervention in the realm of good and evil was a result of a mysterious bonding and interaction between Sangje and the godly ghosts. Through such an explanation, Yi Ik proves the existence of a godly figure who carries out retributive justice in the human world, without departing from the Neo-Confucian theory of *i* and *gi*.

## Conclusion

This essay has examined how Yi Ik modified the West’s religious doctrines through his Neo-Confucian philosophy. Yi maintained a selective stance toward all aspects of Seohak (Western Learning), which included religious doctrines as well as the sciences and ethics. Evidently, although he acknowledged the fundamental concepts of the Western religion, he criticized some later-formed theories, such as that of heaven and hell, for being erroneous. Such a selective stance originates from a very firm standard rooted in his preexisting knowledge, which was the knowledge of traditions. As long as the foreign ideas did not explicitly contradict his own theory of Neo-Confucianism, Yi tried to accommodate them into these Neo-Confucian traditions.

As mentioned previously, Yi Ik defended and accommodated the Lord of Heaven concept insofar as it conformed to that of Sangje as described in the Confucian classics, with particular attention paid to the two deities’ equal ability to control the world’s order, cause disasters, and carry out retributive justice. As a result, while he selectively accepted this overlapping aspect of Sangje and the Lord of Heaven, he rejected other Western concepts, such as that of heaven, hell, and spiritual immortality, as erroneous. In addition, in Yi Ik’s theory structure, the Lord of Heaven who administers different phenomena in the world based on the rule of causality was not a personal god. Instead, this deity was thoroughly reinterpreted based on Neo-Confucian theories on *gwisin* and *i-gi*.

In the Neo-Confucian tradition, Sangje was the heavenly principle, and in theory could not be a personal god. Yi Ik interpreted Sangje as a godly principle of causality through which good deeds were rewarded and evil deeds punished, and asserted that such a principle, when mysteriously combined with *gi* of the ancient saints (*singwi* or godly ghosts), could bestow blessings and punishments upon people. So when he analyzed the Lord of Heaven concept through such a theory of *i* and *gi*, the Lord was no longer the personal god who created the universe, but *cheolli*, or the heavenly principle that could release its power through its union and interaction with *gi*. In this way, the Lord of Heaven was interpreted as *i* (or *silli*) within Yi Ik's philosophical structure, and his power as an emission of energy emanating from the union of *i* and *gi*.

It is uncertain whether the external stimuli of Christianity and the Lord of Heaven concept encouraged Yi Ik to rediscover and reinterpret the concept of Sangje, or whether it only made him slightly modify his pre-existing thinking regarding this deity. It does seem, however, that Western philosophy played a significant role in helping Yi Ik to develop a unique theoretical structure unprecedented in the philosophical traditions of his time.

In either case, it is true that Yi Ik paid special attention on the concept of the Lord of Heaven, reinterpreted it using the *i* and *gi* theory, and in doing so enriched his own theoretical structure. Such analysis calls for a revision of the established academic view that considers Yi Ik's favorable view toward Seohak as evidence of his modernity. As Yi Ik's selective attitude toward the Western religious doctrine demonstrates, Seohak to him was nothing more than an intellectual resource that he studied and understood while establishing his Neo-Confucian theoretical structure.

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