

## The History of Korean Philosophy

### Dialogue between Tudor Petcu\*\* and Halla Kim\*

**TP:** *At the beginning of our dialogue I wish to make reference to the meaning of Korean philosophy in the context of the universal philosophy. I mean I think it would be necessary to present in a relevant way the role that Korean philosophy has played in the evolution of the universal one, especially western philosophy. So, what could you say about this topic ?*

**HK:** The abstract thinking in Korea began with native religious thoughts but it received a critical impetus from various thoughts originated from

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outside of Korea. Buddhism was originally conceived in India and greatly developed in China, but it was enthusiastically received and promoted during the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE – 668 CE) in Korea as well as Unified Silla (668-918) and Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). Indeed, it played a critical and decisive role in the development of mature philosophical theorizing in Korea. Among many of its brilliant contributions, an attempt to effect the achievement of wisdom and perfection in an individual life and in a society under this light was an integral part of this tradition. Later in the 14th century, Buddhism gave hegemony to Neo-Confucianism which originally arose in Sung China. In particular, Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea turned out to be a fertile ground for its further development. For example, the making of a sage in each individual and a virtuous government of a community by such a figure, which culminates in the ideal of sage king, has occupied a central place in this effort.

**TP:** *Which are the main philosophical approaches assumed over the years in the different academic milieus in Korea? Can we talk about a strong Korean phenomenology, or about any analytical Korean philosophy, or so? Every country where philosophy was assumed as a field of research has had a specific and general philosophical tradition, as for example England, very well-known through its analytical philosophy, or Germany through its idealism or phenomenology expressed by Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger. In this case, what about the philosophical tradition in Korea?*

**HK:** To understand what is Korean about Korean Confucianism, we have to look at the issues that Korean Confucians debated and identify those issues that seem to have interested them more than other issues, and which issues seemed to attract more interest in Korea than in the rest of the Confucian world. In the process, we should try to identify distinctive ways Korean Confucianism evolved, what sort of new schools of Confucian thought and practice it produced.

Though I have been studying Korean Confucianism for years, there are many nooks and crannies in Korean Confucian thought and practice I have not had time to explore. Confucianism in Korea, like Confucianism in China and in Japan, is multi-layered and even contradictory, with different scholars arguing for significantly different interpretations of the Confucian Classics and providing significantly different suggestions for how to apply Confucian principles to the world around them. Nevertheless, in my necessarily incomplete survey of Confucian thinking over the five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty, I have noticed one distinctive thread that stands out--a concern for moral psychology.

It is that concern, generated by the recognition of the contradiction between the assumption of human moral perfectibility and the reality of human moral frailty, that led to the disputes between T'ŏegye and Yulgok

over what role the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions should play in moral cultivation and between Han Wŏnjin and Yi Kan over how much of a sanctuary from evil our basic human nature provided. That same concern led to Tasan borrowing from Catholic writings to create a theistic Confucianism and inspired Ch'oe Cheu to create Korea's first indigenous organized religion. Because their concern over human moral frailty led Korean Confucians to discuss issues that either were not as important or were not discussed the same way in neighboring countries and even led them to develop novel approaches to solving old Confucian issues, I argue that one thing, at least, that is Korean about Korean Confucianism is this emphasis placed on the search for an explanation of, and a solution to, the inevitability of human moral failure, of the inability of human beings, no matter how much they study the Confucian Classics and how well they understand them, to consistently act in a selfless manner, to act in the way their Confucian tradition tells them they should and could act.

**TP:** *Western philosophy has always accorded a huge attention to the relation between philosophy and religion although there is basically difficult to find too many common denominators, first of all because of their comprehensive logics. Of course, from this point of view there would be a lot to say, especially if we should take into account the modal logics as a way to explain the Reality in comparison with religion, mostly based on a mystical worldview which has its own logics. But we shouldn't forget about the different Christian efforts in the Middle Age to create a liaison, a strong connection between philosophy and religion, as Saint Anselm or Thomas Aquinas did. Anyway, what can you say about the way by which was defined the relation between philosophy and religion in Korea and who were the main Korean philosophers focused on the analyses of this topic?*

**HK:** Philosophy and religion go hand in hand in Korean Philosophy.

In his Eleven Theses on Feuerbach, Karl Marx claims that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it,” thus incisely criticizing the abstract, isolated way that philosophy in the West had been practiced, in separation from the true reality of the world. According to Marx's conception, philosophy is to be fundamentally practical beyond ‘theories,’ both simple and complex (from the Greek verb, “theorein”). Marx's criticism, however, would be completely pointless if directed against the Korean Neo-Confucianism/Buddhism. For the latter has always been preoccupied with a concrete praxis in the daily context. Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism is, by its very nature, fundamentally practical, regardless of any shortcomings it is occasionally perceived to have.

In the familiar division of philosophy influenced by Western approaches, we commonly conceive it as being composed of three parts, metaphysics,

ethics and epistemology. For Korean philosophy, this would be completely inadequate. For it miserably fails to capture the most essential part of it - the art of self-cultivation (or as we can put it, “a way of life and thought”) is the most important part of philosophy proper. Just like metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, the art of self-cultivation (which I propose to call “sugihak (The study of self-cultivation)”) surely has theoretical components but the most essential component of it is its practical part. One who studies it must not only understand it or theoretically know about it but must also internalize it and actively practice it in his or her concrete relation with others. This is why it is different from theoretical disciplines (including the typically theoretical ‘philosophical ethics’ as it is widely taught in academia). You don’t have to be ethical to teach philosophical ethics but you cannot teach sugihak without exemplifying it yourself. There should be a unity of thought and action in the art. The Neo-Confucian/Buddhist reflection can be on things in the world but it must be directed toward oneself, thus “self-reflection.”

**TP:** *Would it be correct to say that Buddhism as worldview represents one of the most important foundations of Korean philosophy ?*

**HK:** As Charles Muller suggests, Korean Buddhism is distinctive within the broader field of East Asian Buddhism for the pronounced degree of its syncretic discourse. Korean Buddhist monks throughout history have demonstrated a marked tendency in their essays and commentaries to focus on the solution of disagreements between various sects within Buddhism, or on conflicts between Buddhism and other religions. While a strong ecumenical tendency is noticeable in the writings of dozens of Korean monks, among the most prominent in regard to their exposition of syncretic philosophy are Wŏnhyo (元曉 617–686), Pojo Chinul (普照知訥 1158–1210) and Hamhŏ Kihwa (涵虛己和 1376–1433).

The chief operative conceptual framework with which these scholar-monks carried out their syncretic writings can be shown to be derived from the metaphysics connected with the Hwaŏm (華嚴 Ch. Hua-yen) school, as well as the soteriological discourse of the closely related Awakening of Faith (大乘起信論) tradition, both of which have dual roots in Indian Buddhist and native East Asian philosophy.

Among all the earliest forms of Buddhism, the most outstanding is the synoptic philosophy of Wŏnhyo. According to him, the most fundamental Buddhist doctrines are to be understood from the logic of interfusion which enables him to embrace and harmonize different strands of Buddhism without forsaking the substance of them. His view then culminates in the metaphysics of One Mind with its soteriological implications. Then the

holism of Ŭisang (625-702) and his Hwaŏm Buddhism is discussed with an account of his Ocean Seal Chart (華嚴—乘法界道) followed by a brief discussion of Pure Land Buddhism and Consciousness-Only School in unified Silla dynasty. No discussion of Korean Buddhism is complete without Chinul (1158-1210), the founder of Sŏn (c. Chan, j. Zen) Buddhism in Korea. Chinul's Sŏn philosophy with a focus on the notion of "True Mind" is developed in the scheme of Sudden Enlightenment to our true nature under the guise of nothingness followed by a Gradual Cultivation via the practice of nothingness. This gave rise to the age-long controversy over Tonjŏm debate, i.e., Sudden Enlightenment vs. Gradual Development in Korea. Indeed, defying Chinul, T'aego Pou (1301-82), towards the end of Koryŏ, the final national master, emphasized Buddhism as a quintessentially practical discipline where both awakening and cultivation are fully realized in one fell swoop. This effort of Chinul and T'aego Pou were later continued by Chosŏn Buddhist monks, especially, Kihwa and Sŏsan (1520-1601). The Neo-Confucian attack on Buddhism, it will be shown, is in this respect unfounded, for Buddhism, in particular, the quintessential Buddhist concept of nothingness, simply does not entail nihilism conceived as expressing a fatalistic stance about the forces of nature (including human nature) with a strong implication for inaction and despair.

**TP:** *We shouldn't forget to highlight the contemporary philosophical theories in Korea, because in our days it's very hard to find a philosophical task given the technological revolution and the development of pragmatism. I am saying that because the general question that is addressed even in the British and American schools of philosophy is the following one: what role can philosophy play in our days, in a society where science is evolving on and on? But in spite of this fact and according to the question I have mentioned above, there are numerous contemporary philosophical views related especially to politics, science and economics. So, which are the most important contemporary Korean philosophical theories and approaches?*

**HK:** I hope to promote the value and meaning of Korean philosophy in the very context of the age of globalization without forsaking our deep-rooted tradition in Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism and Tonghak (Eastern Learning) among others. This is why the topic of Korean philosophy as such and its modernity is important. Our vision is that there is something very valuable in the traditional Korean thought but this merit cannot be fully appreciated until we consider it in light of the achievement and dynamics of western philosophy. Therein lies the importance of East-West comparative philosophy, in particular, East-West comparative moral theory. The latter is all the more important because Koreans traditionally prided themselves on epitomizing the value of morality "in the East." The issues in

traditional moral theories can best be elucidated and illuminated by the recent development and achievement in moral and cognitive psychology (e.g., moral modularity hypothesis). Finally, we plan to approach and analyze many of the major issues in traditional Korean philosophy in the context of this comparative scheme and provide new answers to those old questions. For example, we strongly hope to come up with a contemporary understanding of the essential notion of *li* and *qi* as well as the causal concepts such as “produce” (*pal*), “ride” (*seung*), “begets” (*saeng*). Thus we can see that all these topics - philosophy and modernity, East and West comparative philosophy, some major issues in the history of Korean philosophy, Korean Neo-Confucianism and its moral psychology as well as the East-West comparative moral philosophy are all closely intertwined in the context of the comparative approaches to the problems in Korean philosophy against the most recent development in Western philosophy.

Korean philosophy is in its unique, particularized situation in the Korean peninsula and it can be best illuminated when we historically revisit the socio-political-economic-intellectual development up to now since 1945. Korea was freed from the Japanese colonial rule (1910~1945) as soon as WW II ended. At that time, there were fierce ideological disputes between socialists and liberalists. Since then until now, North Korea has followed Marx-Leninism and *Juche* (self-reliance) Ideology of its communist founder Kim Il-sŏng, while South Korea has discussed various theories of philosophy under liberalism. Thus the South Korean philosophy in the 1950s and 60s leaned toward German Idealism and Existentialism. This inclination was natural for the South Korean philosophers who experienced the Japan’s colonialism and the Korean War (1950~1953). The South Koreans had to gather powers in order not to lose the sovereignty of nation and recover the loss of human dignity from the war. At that time, the leading ideology was one-nation-ism (一民主義) that we are one ethnic race speaking one language. Such a strong nationalism in South Korea led to staunch anti-communism. This anti-communism was combined with the nation theory of Fichte and Hegel. The combination of nationalism and anti-communism remained unchanged until the pro-democratic resistance movement in June of 1987 occurred. In this situation, even liberalism was regarded as an impure thought. Korean traditional thoughts were deemed valuable only to the degree to which it supported nationalism. Therefore, South Koreans could not enjoy the freedom of thoughts much like North Korea. However, the philosophers in South Korea made incessant efforts to achieve democratization. They actively discussed the social critical theory of Frankfurt Schools in the 1970s, Marx-Leninism and North Korean *Juche*-Ideology in the 1980s, and neo-rationalism, post-Marxism, and post-structuralism in the 1990s. Finally, the issue of environmental value and welfarism came to the fore in the 2000’s. They made continual efforts for

the purpose of democratization as well. Of course, these efforts were chiefly made rather outside the academia rather than in it. The philosophers in the academia concentrated on German Idealism, Existentialism, Phenomenology, English and American Analytical Philosophy, East Asian Philosophy, and Korean traditional philosophy. Though there were conflicts between the philosophical activities within academia and those outside of it, various schools of philosophy emerged in South Korea in contrast to North Korea. South Korean philosophers have discussed philosophy in a various ways in order to solve the conflicts between Korean traditional philosophy and the accepted Western philosophy, and then they tried to recover the identity of Korean philosophy which they lost during the 36 years of Japan's colonial rules. They have also discussed the true modernization of their community. Furthermore, they have discussed how to unify South and North Korea. True, it must be acknowledged that there were conflicts between the traditional Korean philosophy and the Western philosophy in the process. But we hope to elevate and develop this into productive communication between the two. This is the area in which East and West comparative framework can be considered and employed most fruitfully.

The relevance of traditional Korean philosophy to the meaning and value of Korean philosophy for the sake of ecological value as well as communal value can be seen from the way that I pursue various topics in the efforts of individual efforts. We do our best, and do plan, to make contribution to the issue of environmental values in our research agenda (e.g., post-modern variations with a touch of Taoism). The communal value is addressed in our research too (Confucian communitarianism.) The Korean society has now reached a critical juncture where its tradition has come into conflict with modernity and postmodernity. Its modernization was achieved not by the revolution from below but by the order imposed from above. In a word, the Korean society was modernized in the pre-modern way. Strictly speaking, the Korean society was not modernized until the pro-democratic resistance movement in June of 1987 took place. However, on the one hand, strong collectivism still exists in the Korean society, and, on the other hand, strong egocentrism thrives. Furthermore, Koreans achieved a certain measure of success of modernization at the price of environmental disasters such as the pollution of the air as well as the rivers among others. I plan to shed new lights on how to solve these problems as Koreans are now faced with the task of harmonizing the Confucian communitarianism of our traditional society with the modern libertarianism of the Western society. Some of them say that we have to recreate the Western modernity on the basis of our tradition, and some of them say that we have to keep alive our tradition on the basis of the Western modernity. Others say that we have to follow either post-modernity respecting difference among one another from the viewpoint of

Post-structuralism, or the 'autonomous movement' from the point of the Spinoza-Marxism. Now, some South Korean philosophers accept the theory of J. Habermas and J. Rawls, but others embrace the theory of A. MacIntyre, M. Sandel, and C. Taylor in order to synthesize the new tradition and modernity after 1987. Of course, there is also an attempt to solve the problem of modernization from the standpoint of Post-Marxism and Spinoza-Marxism, especially G. Deleuze, and A. Negri. In addition, many South Korean philosophers are seriously discussing this issue in regard to our Confucianism, too. The philosophers inclined toward communitarianism contend that we should not accept the liberalism of the West. They say that the liberalism is not suitable for us because our way of life is essentially based on Confucianism. According to their view, the South Korean society is now more individualistic than any other society, and so we must develop the Confucian communitarianism in order to solve this problem. We must also recreate the Confucian value in the economic sphere as well as the political sphere in order to realize the truly East Asian value. Thus we can see that all these important areas of research have been incorporated in the Korean lab project.