



In Search of the Origins of Korean Philosophy

Contents

Lecture 1 (Course Contents)	3
1 Introduction – Lack of Records	3
2 Names	3
2.1 조선	4
2.2 東夷	4
2.3 삼한	4
3 Language	5
3.1 한자	5
3.1.1 한자 as an Ambivalent Medium	6
3.2 Korean Vernacular Writing before 한글	6
4 Religion	7
4.1 Before Confucianism and Buddhism	7
4.2 The Introduction of Confucianism and Buddhism	8
4.3 The Role of Buddhism in Shaping Korean Spirituality	9
A Glossary of Terms	10

Lecture Contents 1 (Course Contents)

1 Introduction – Lack of Records

There is a notable lack of documents from the era in which Korean identity was formed. At the time, the Korean peninsula was split into diverse kingdoms and origins that eventually merged into a single Korean identity. In the middle of the 12th century, the kingdom of 고려 arose and became the first political entity to hold the entirety of the Korean peninsula under its power. This could be considered the point at which Korean history began to be unified into a single narrative with a standard Korean culture across kingdoms. All the diverse cultural groups who inhabited the peninsula ended up becoming part of a joint Korean culture that was formed as a fusion of those cultures. It is still unclear why there is such a distinct lack of records from ancient times. Some historians theorize it could be due to neglect of written records in favor of oral tradition, the impact of changing writing systems, and the disavowal of previous historical records from separate kingdoms once the Korean peninsula became unified. In a contrast to this, Korea would eventually start to meticulously document its history—even being known as the Kingdom of Records during the 조선 dynasty. This dynasty even compiled the 조선왕조실록 (朝鮮王朝實錄), the Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty, which would end up being the longest continuous documentation of a single dynasty in the world. Given the lack of data, an important question is then: how can we reconstruct the conceptual understanding of Korean identity that Koreans had in ancient times? One approach is to look at how these ancient inhabitants of the Peninsula and their cultures were reflected in the eyes of others. Ancient Chinese historians looked down on foreigners—referring to them as barbarians—and had biased accounts; however, by comparing these outside materials with the few available materials from this time in Korea, one can arrive at a more objective portrayal of the situation. The analysis of the self-understanding of ancient Koreans is complicated further by the fact that older Korean records were written in 한문. What one can affirm is that Korea, perhaps under different names or geographical expansion, was considered a distinct external entity to that of China. It was often perceived as a threat, but more importantly, more than just a group of people—a nation or state different from themselves. We will analyze the formation of Korean self- and national identity via three lenses: names, language, and then religion.

2 Names

In order to communicate effectively, a name must convey the reality of what it represents. The interpretation of what the name means, however, tends to vary from culture to culture. This is the case for terms like love, democracy, or happiness. An example of this is the Korean term 서학 (西學); in ancient times, it referred to learning from the late 唐 and early 宋 dynasties in China. This implies that earlier references to the West in Korea pertained to China. It could be argued that the intellectuals of the ancient Korean peninsula did not perceive China as the centre of the world but rather another culture to the west of their position. With time, this started to shift towards referring to learning from European texts that were translated into Chinese by missionaries based in China at the time.

At various moments throughout its history, the Korean peninsula has been divided into several different kingdoms. In such times, people living under different kingdoms likely did not consider

themselves as one or as sharing the same single identity, but they did realize how different they were from China, in both culture and language. Due to their cultural and linguistic similarity, in contrast to China and other surrounding cultures, interaction between the kingdoms in the Peninsula was particularly close. This interaction sometimes led to competition and other times to cooperation, but it importantly led to the formation of a linguistic and cultural continuum that later would culminate in the formation of Korean culture as we know it.

2.1 조선

조선 was the name of the first Korean kingdom. It was the earliest to appear in Chinese records as a proper political entity in the Korean peninsula, mentioned by 司馬遷 as an important region when the 周 kingdom was founded. Chinese sage 箕子 (기자), a 商 Dynasty loyalist, was dispatched to 조선 once the 商 Dynasty fell to the 周. This is important because it suggests that already by the time of the 商 Dynasty, 조선 existed as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity from China. Furthermore, the fact that 箕子 was not made a subject of King 武 of 周 implies that 조선 kept a significant degree of autonomy.

2.2 東夷

東夷 (동이) is an abstract, umbrella term commonly used by the Chinese to refer to the non-Chinese peoples to their east. It appears in records a lot earlier than 조선, even being traceable back to the time of oracle bones in the early 11th century BCE. Since then, 東夷 continuously appeared in bronze inscriptions and history books. This term was often used derogatorily, referring to the others as less civilized, but this slowly changed over time. At first, the Chinese dynasties were cautious of the 東夷 and wanted to conquer them. Each of their victories over the peoples of the Korean peninsula was proudly documented. Gradually, 東夷 came to mean more generally the civilizations in the East rather than barbarians or something derogatory. In Japan, Korea was called the Eastern State (東國/동국)—even though geographically is to the West of Japan—and Koreans started to identify themselves as the East. This custom of referring to oneself as the East continued until the end of the 조선 dynasty.

2.3 삼한

삼한 (三韓) is a term that refers to the time the Korean peninsula was divided into three major kingdoms: 고구려 (高句麗), 백제 (百濟), and 신라 (新羅). The 한 in 삼한 is a Korean word which means grand, large, many and in spite of being written as 韓 it is believed to be unrelated to the Chinese 韓 state. This word has been continuously used by Koreans to refer to themselves up to today—with the country of South Korea even naming itself as 대한민국 (大韓民國). It is interesting to note that today, North Korea refers to itself as 조선 instead of 대한 (大韓).

Originally, 고구려 was a kingdom in the northern part of the Korean peninsula and 한 one in the southern part. The word Korea comes from 고려, which was a kingdom close to China and the first to both accept Chinese culture and confront China. Originally, the term 삼한 did not include 고구려 but rather three smaller kingdoms in the south, but after a long process of conflict, fusion, and integration, the peninsula started to unite and 고구려 started to be included within 삼한. 한

국 (韓國) is not considered the name of a separate ancient kingdom, but rather a united identity in which the diverse cultural traditions of the kingdoms established in the Korean peninsula are fused.

3 Language

Language shapes thought and thought shapes language. Despite their language being greatly influenced by the Chinese language, Koreans did not adopt spoken Chinese. As a part of the East Asian Cultural Sphere, Koreans adopted written literary Chinese (한문), but this literacy enriched vernacular Korean instead of replacing it. 한문 allowed Korea to maintain a cultural connection to China while keeping its distinct linguistic identity. All the way from the time of oracle bones to major works like the first history book recorded by the Chinese, 史記, there have been references to peoples such as 東夷, 三韓, and 朝鮮. Although these records were far from unbiased, the one in 史記 being basically a justification for the 漢 conquest of 朝鮮, they still show that China was well aware of the entities to its northeast and that Chinese historians paid attention to the languages of these kingdoms. Chinese sources from the 삼한 period noted that the languages of the various Korean and Manchurian entities in the area were largely the same as that of 고구려. Even when small differences were mentioned, mutual intelligibility was implied. This suggests that there was a linguistic and possibly cultural affinity across the Peninsula and Manchuria. The kingdom of 신라, located the furthest away from China, is interesting because records mention the need of interpreters from 백제 in order to successfully communicate with Chinese officials; however, the same sources describe the political system, clothing, and customs of 신라 as similar to those of 백제 and 고구려. 백제, which used to be a small chiefdom amongst 삼한, progressively absorbed smaller states and expanded. It culturally descended from the northern traditions, bringing them south and it likely facilitated the movement of culture and political organization from Manchuria into the Korean Peninsula, as well as linguistic exchange amongst 삼한. The fact that 삼한 shared languages facilitated inter-marriage among elites, exchange of artisans and scholars, and the spread of Buddhism, Confucian political models, and other value sets, which ultimately strengthened a sense of cultural continuity across the peninsula.

3.1 한자

When 한자 was used, each character could be adopted for either its sound (similar to 음독/音讀 in Japanese) or its meaning (similar to 훈독/訓讀). Thus, you have cases like a place named 곰나루. 곰나루 means bear's ferry, and this could be written as either 固麻 or 熊津. Ultimately, 熊津 was chosen for the place's name, changing the pronunciation to 웅진 (although it could still be pronounced as 곰나루). This dichotomy of systems forced Koreans to juggle multiple layers: the spoken and written languages, the phonetic use of characters and their semantic use, native Korean words and Sino-Korean vocabulary. Ultimately the adoption of 한자 allowed Koreans to operate across multiple linguistic systems and gave them flexible tools to express Korean ideas using a writing system that originally did not belong to them. On top of that, it enabled a massive transfer of knowledge from China. 한자 allowed for the adoption of Sino-Korean 日用語彙, sophisticated abstract concepts, and moral, philosophical, and political ideas from Chinese literature; however, linguistic difference created a cultural boundary with China in which Chinese civilization was the source of writing, but Korean vernacular culture was the source of identity.

3.1.1 한자 as an Ambivalent Medium

Speaking and listening comes naturally to everyone, but writing and reading require a writing system. Writing allows us to store information, transmit ideas across generations, and develop complex intellectual traditions. Up until the creation of 한글 in 1443, the Korean language depended on 한자 to read and write. 한자 was used in a way unique to Korea as compared to China or other cultures within the East Asian cultural sphere. Besides helping Koreans communicate with China, access books, and overall join a larger cultural world, it also helped them express their own language. This was achieved by modifying Chinese characters to record Korean sounds and sentences. Modifying Chinese characters in such a way led to a complex linguistic environment with spoken Korean, written Classical Chinese, 한자, and then 한글—which shaped the way ancient Koreans thought, communicated, and learnt. 한자 is considered an ambivalent medium insofar that it allowed Koreans to both communicate with the outside world and express their Korean identity. 한자 was, however, far from being a perfect means for native communication. Due to 한자 being logographic and based on Chinese grammar, it was not efficient for writing Korean. This led to a big gap between speech and writing as well as a big barrier of entry to literacy. Ordinary people relied on oral tradition whereas 한자 documents were controlled by the elite. 한자 allowed for systematic education that took great influence from the systems in China. During the 삼한 period, Confucian schools were established and scholars read Chinese classics to understand how to manage local ethics, politics, and philosophy. Studying the relationship between language and writing in Korea is complicated because this involves the analysis of the spoken vs. the written language, Chinese vs. Korean structure, semantic vs. phonetic readings, and elite writing vs. common oral traditions, but it is clear that 한자 helped shape both the outer and inner dimensions of Korean intellectual life.

3.2 Korean Vernacular Writing before 한글

There were two main directions in which Korean was attempted to be written.

The first one was making Chinese texts readable in Korean grammar, a type of interpretive reading system. This made Confucian and Buddhist texts accessible without requiring spoken Chinese ability, which ultimately allowed a lot more people to engage in elite learning. This system was perfected by 설총 (薛聰) with his writing system 이두. 이두 used 한자 to express Korean grammatical markers, write Korean names of places and objects, and interpret Chinese texts in Korean word order, with the aim of bridging the Chinese and Korean languages. 설총 was a prominent Confucian scholar who aimed to introduce more people to the study of the Confucian classics via 이두. His father was 원효 (元曉), one of Korea's greatest Buddhist thinkers. 원효 deeply mastered Buddhist literature while remaining deeply rooted in the vernacular culture of the people. This led him to hold an appreciation for the vernacular Korean language and for him to see it as a legitimate vehicle for Buddhist teaching. 원효 used songs and popular language to teach Buddhist philosophy to the illiterate. This demonstrates that in 신라, the boundaries between Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks, and indigenous practitioners were not strict: 원효 and 설총 embodied the connections between Confucianism (studying classics), Buddhism (teaching the public), and indigenous thought (local songs, vernacular culture). This interconnectedness shaped 신라 intellectual life.

The second direction in which vernacular Korean was attempted to be written was directly expressing the actual spoken language using 한자. A prominent example of one such system was 향찰, which was used to write entire sentences of vernacular poems known as 향가 (鄕歌)—using

한자 based on their phonetic value. As 신라 elites became more and more proficient in Classical Chinese, they relied less on documenting their spoken language. The production of 향가 started to rapidly decline, to the point that 진성여왕 (眞聖女王) grew concerned. The Queen then ordered in 888 for a collection of surviving 향가 to be kept for posterity. The original anthology was lost, but studies have been made on copies of the poems that were made at later stages.

The writing systems in existence helped Korean Buddhism to develop uniquely. Although both Chinese and Korean Buddhism used Sanskrit-derived scriptures translated to Chinese, in Korea the vernacular culture played a strong role; thinkers like 설총 emphasized local accessibility, and writing systems encouraged Korean linguistic identity.

4 Religion

4.1 Before Confucianism and Buddhism

Korean identity has been influenced by both indigenous and foreign cultures that were adopted by the inhabitants of the peninsula. The ancient kingdoms of Korea also developed distinct identities that later became interconnected. Korean culture was not a blank slate pre-Confucianism and Buddhism; it already had unique characteristics. When Koreans engaged with foreign cultures, they often maintained awareness of these indigenous roots. Oral traditions and recorded histories have preserved the stories of Korean origins, which are relevant to this day. The most widely remembered origin story of Korean civilization is the 단군 (檀君) legend. It appears relatively late in written records, so many people dismiss it as a myth; however, myths arise out of deep cultural memories and older traditions. Because of this, many people tie the 단군 legend with the widespread prehistoric dolmens in the Korean peninsula. Researchers suggest that this significant high amount of dolmens, which require large, organized communal activity to be created, are evidence that in prehistoric times there was already a sense of a shared Korean identity, which later became mythologized as 단군. One interpretation of the myth is that, at a certain point, bronze-using groups (Old 조선) asserted their authority over earlier Neolithic communities. Indigenous beliefs included worship of natural forces (wind, rain, clouds) and animals (bear, tiger). The bronze-using newcomers emphasized sun worship, symbolized by 단군's father, 환웅 (桓雄). Then, the myth is supposed to narrate the union of these two cultures, the Bear tribe (neolithic and indigenous) and the Sun tribe (new Bronze Age elites). Scholars say that while the sun tribe interpretation might be debatable, the idea of a union among different tribes is likely correct and central to the meaning of the myth. Interestingly, the myth of 단군 portrays nation foundation through peaceful cooperation—as opposed to the struggle and conflict seen in most other foundation myths. Buddhist monk 일연 (一然) recorded this myth in his famous 삼국유사 (三國遺事) in a time of foreign threat and treated it as the origin of a shared Korean identity prior to the 삼국 era. From these myths, we can see that ancient Koreans valued cooperation over conflict, continuity rather than rupture, and harmony with the natural world.

삼국사기 and 삼국유사: 삼국사기 (三國史記) was compiled in 1145 CE during 고려 by 김부식 (金富軾) and a team of Confucian scholars. It was a state-sponsored Confucian historical chronicle of around 1200 years of Korean history. It mostly contained political events, rulers, wars, etc. The 史記 in the name reveals something important: this book was modelled after the 史記

of China, to signal legitimacy, authority, and proper historical methodology. *삼국유사*, compiled about 136 years later by Buddhist monk *일연*, had a different approach: it compiled myths, legends, folktales, miracles, Buddhist stories, and local traditions—including the aforementioned *단군* myth. *遺事* intentionally signals that the book includes materials omitted from official records and shows respect for folklore, oral tradition, cultural memory, and Buddhism. *삼국유사* aimed to show that a people's history is not only about the kings and the elite, but also the cultural expressions of the everyday person.

In Ancient Chinese historical records, the early Korean kingdoms and chiefdoms are often described as engaging in *飲酒歌舞* (*음주가무*). This did not refer to reckless drunkenness but rather activities related to sacred rituals and heavenly worship. This was known in Korean as *천신무용* (*天神舞踊*), a ceremonial festival in which people made offerings through music, movement, and communal celebration. This joyful way of expressing reverence directly contrasted with the solemn worship often seen in other ideologies like Confucianism and Buddhism. Even as Koreans adopted Confucian rational governance and Buddhist religious spirituality, they preserved their own sacred dance tradition. The spirit of *천신무용* is something still reflected to this day in Korean religiosity: worship is communal, not solitary; ritual is joyful, not ascetic; the divine is approached through celebration, not submission; and spirituality flows through the body. This is why later Korean traditions (e.g., mask dances *탈춤*, *농악놀이*, *판소리*) remain deeply rooted in emotion, rhythm, and communal movement.

The adoption of new ideologies in Korea, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, was not frictionless: the elite of the time who benefited from the existing indigenous traditions resisted the adoption of new ideas because it could threaten their power; however, this never escalated to large-scale conflict. Compared to other cultures, *삼한* was particularly open to foreign ideologies. They regarded, for instance, new teachings in Buddhism and Confucianism as things that could strengthen their authority, not weaken it. Each large ideology was seen slightly differently though: Confucianism was valued for governance and education, but institutional Confucian reforms were difficult at first. Buddhism, on the other hand, was embraced as a powerful means to unify people spiritually. Daoism was approached with caution, as formal Daoism was seen as very foreign. Philosophical Daoist ideas were more accepted since they were seen as compatible with existing indigenous Korean thought.

These new ideologies were also smoothly integrated because they arrived gradually, not through conquest. Buddhism arrived through diplomatic gifts and voluntary missions, Confucianism arrived via scholar exchanges, and Daoist ideas circulated via cultural contact. Slow and peaceful transmission allowed local elites time to adapt.

4.2 The Introduction of Confucianism and Buddhism

Long before Confucianism, Koreans were already using *한자* for diplomacy, which allowed Koreans to access many of the classical literary works from China. A major milestone was the foundation of the *태학* (*太學*), the National Confucian School in 372 CE. This was the beginning of systematic literacy and study of the Confucian classics and elite education in the *삼국*. 372 CE is also when the kingdom of *고구려* officially accepted Buddhism. From this, we can infer that the three kingdoms accepted these two ideologies as complements to existing systems instead of competing systems. Confucianism, Buddhism, and indigenous culture intertwined to form early Korean iden-

tity. 원효, the greatest Buddhist philosopher in Korean history, mastered Buddhist teachings and aimed to share them with ordinary people through songs and ordinary teaching. His son, 설총, mastered Confucian classics and also tried to make the teachings more accessible to common Koreans through systems like 이두. Both men were independent thinkers and show how the general public also acquired these new ideologies and integrated them with existing ones.

4.3 The Role of Buddhism in Shaping Korean Spirituality

In the 삼국 period, Buddhism was not part of the curriculum in national educational institutions like 태학 and 국학 (國學). Because of this, it developed more dynamic learners, while the national Confucian institutions were primarily for those who wanted to become officials of considerable status. Buddhism was able to appeal not only to the elites but also to common people; if you so wanted, you could learn personally by following the teachings of Buddhist masters. Many of these Buddhist masters of the 삼국 period were comprehensive thinkers and intellectuals who played different societal roles. Some were kings, mentors, scholars, poets, diplomats, soldiers, or even musicians or singers. At this time, Confucianism and Buddhism did not conflict with one another. For Koreans, both were foreign teachings (as opposed to China where Buddhism is foreign but Confucianism is not), so they both were seen as complementary sources of meaning. Most eminent monks began with the Confucian Classics before turning towards Buddhism. In a way, Buddhism was seen as a way to explore profound truths beyond social norms once the limits of Confucian learning were reached.

When Indian Buddhism entered China, the exchange of ideas was not one-directional: Chinese intellectuals critically examined Buddhist ideas, wrote new commentaries on their own classics, and revised native thought in response. This reshaped both Chinese thought and Buddhism itself. A similar two-way transformation occurred in Korea, where Buddhism influenced indigenous beliefs, worldviews, concepts of the self, and cultural identity as a whole. At the same time, Buddhism was digested and interpreted according to Korean culture. A philosophy becomes truly rooted when it both influences and is influenced by the host culture.

A Glossary of Terms

Table 1: Key Terms in Korean Philosophy and Culture

Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
철학	哲學	cheolhak	Philosophy; the study of wisdom and principles
도	道	do	The Way; principle, path, or cosmic order
한문	漢文	hanmun	Classical Chinese writing used in Korea
삼국시대	三國時代	samguk sidae	The Three Kingdoms Period of Korea
한자	漢字	hanja	Chinese characters used in Korean contexts
한글	—	hangeul	Native Korean alphabet created in the 15th century
선불교	禪佛教	seon bulgyo	Korean Zen Buddhism
공자	孔子	gongja	Confucius, the Chinese sage
노자	老子	noja	Laozi, Daoist philosopher
맹자	孟子	maengja	Mencius, Confucian philosopher
고려	高麗	goryeo	Goryeo dynasty; medieval Korean kingdom
조선	朝鮮	joseon	Joseon dynasty; early modern Korea
향찰	鄉札	hyangchal	Early Korean writing system using Chinese characters phonetically
구결	口訣	gugyeol	Annotation system aiding the reading of Chinese texts
이두	吏讀	idu	Mixed script system using Chinese characters for Korean grammar
삼재	三才	samjae	The Three Powers: Heaven, Earth, and Humanity
음양	陰陽	eumyang	Yin and Yang; complementary cosmic forces
오행	五行	ohaeng	Five Elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, water
마음	—	maeum	Mind-heart; emotional and moral center of a person
사칠논쟁	四七論爭	sachil nonjaeng	Debate on the Four Beginnings and Seven Emotions
사단	四端	sadan	Four moral sprouts: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom
칠정	七情	chiljeong	Seven emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, desire
리	理	ri	Principle; metaphysical pattern or moral order
기	氣	gi	Vital force; material energy through which principle manifests
퇴계	退溪	Toegye	Pen name of Yi Hwang, major Korean Neo-Confucian scholar
율곡	栗谷	Yulgok	Pen name of Yi I, influential Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher

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Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
호락논쟁 호	湖洛論爭 湖	horak nonjaeng ho	Ho–Rak Debate on human and animal nature “Ho”; refers to the Ho faction (Chungcheong region)
락	洛	rak	“Rak”; refers to the Rak faction (Seoul region)
성	性	seong	Nature; inherent moral-mind nature of beings
인물성동이	人物性同異	inmulseong dongi	Debate on whether human and animal natures are same or different
인의예지	仁義禮智	inui yeji	Four cardinal virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom
미발	未發	mibal	“Not-yet-aroused”; pre-emotional state of the heart-mind
공부 우리	工夫 一	gongbu uri	Effort, cultivation, practical moral work “We”; relational self emphasizing collective identity
조선왕조실록 서학	朝鮮王朝實錄 西學	joseon wangjo sillok seohak	Annals of the Joseon Dynasty Western Learning; introduction of Catholic/Western thought
기자	箕子	gija	Legendary sage-king said to have come to Gojoseon
동이	東夷	dongi	Ancient Chinese term for peoples of the East
동국	東國	dongguk	“Eastern Country”; classical name for Korea
삼한	三韓	samhan	The Three Han federations of ancient Korea
고구려	高句麗	goguryeo	Goguryeo; powerful northern Korean kingdom
백제	百濟	baekje	Baekje; southwestern Korean kingdom
신라	新羅	silla	Silla; southeastern Korean kingdom
대한민국	大韓民國	daehan min-guk	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
대한	大韓	daehan	“Great Han”; national designation
한국	韓國	hanguk	Korea; modern national name
음독	音讀	eumdok	Sino-Korean reading (sound reading)
훈독	訓讀	hundok	Native-Korean meaning-based reading
곰나루	熊津	gomnaru	Old name for Ungjin/Gongju; literally “Bear Ford”
웅진	熊津	ungjin	Capital of Baekje during mid-period
설총	薛聰	Seolchong	Early Silla scholar associated with Idu
원효	元曉	Wonhyo	Silla Buddhist monk and philosopher
향가	鄉歌	hyangga	Native Silla poems written with hyangchal
진성여왕	眞聖女王	Jinseong yeowang	Queen Jinseong of Silla
단군	檀君	Dangun	Mythical founder of Korea
환웅	桓雄	Hwanung	Father of Dangun; heavenly prince
일연	一然	Iryeon	Monk who compiled the *Samguk Yusa*
삼국유사	三國遺事	samguk yusa	“Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”; historical anthology

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Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
삼국사기	三國史記	samguk sagi	“History of the Three Kingdoms” ; official chronicle
김부식	金富軾	Kim Busik	Compiler of the *Samguk Sagi*
음주가무	飲酒歌舞	eumju gamu	Drinking, singing, and dancing
천신무용	天神舞踊	cheonsin muyong	Heavenly-spirit ritual dance
탈춤	—	talchum	Mask dance performance
농악놀이	—	nongak nori	Farmers’ percussion performance
판소리	—	pansori	Korean narrative musical storytelling
태학	太學	taehak	National academy in early Korea
국학	國學	gukhak	National learning institution; study of national classics
