



Introduction to Korean Philosophy and Culture

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Lecture Contents 1 (Course Contents)

1 What is Korean Philosophy?

Korean Philosophy is the sustained way of thinking developed by Koreans over time, distinct from either Western or Chinese philosophies—although it has received significant influences from both (especially the latter). Korean Philosophy has two key characteristics. Firstly, it is universal, which means that it is understandable and applicable to anyone, regardless of nationality. Secondly, it is particular, which means that it offers insights that differentiate it from other philosophical traditions. As it is the case with other philosophies, Korean Philosophy is not static; it evolves along the dynamic nature of thought within diverse cultural contexts and influences. In order to understand philosophy fully, one must consider both its universal and particular aspects, as well as the historical and cultural context in which it developed. Successful philosophies are then able to provide insight into the cultures of their time and how ideas spread across cultural boundaries.

1.1 Philosophy in the West compared to Korean Philosophy

The ancient Greeks developed a basic worldview, which was handed down to Western European countries through centuries of philosophical study. Despite originating in Greece, the scope of Western Philosophy covers different traditions and areas. The key is that philosophy must be a way to explore the world in a fundamental way. When the term philosophy entered East Asian countries in the early 20th century, there were some challenges because the traditional view of philosophy did not align well with existing local intellectual traditions. At first, the terms 철학 or 哲學 referred exclusively to Western philosophy, since it was thought that it meant a fundamental way of thinking that had only one type, namely the Western type originated in ancient Greece. With time, other non-Western philosophical traditions got integrated into the Korean and the overall global philosophical discourse. Scholars started to redefine our understanding of philosophy to adapt it to a global context, showing the shift in the global trend towards comparative philosophy. The East Asian term 道 (도) signifies a broader quest for understanding, and it encompasses various meanings like principle and virtue. Importantly, it does not strictly separate philosophy from religion; it requires practicing in real life rather than mere academic engagement. This mismatch between old and new terms, 道 vs. 哲學, has led to some regions to use the translation of philosophy in the narrow sense that only includes Western philosophy, whereas in other regions it signifies the quest to ultimately integrate Western philosophy and traditional 道 in a broader sense. 철학 uses this latter interpretation, which means Korean philosophy aims to integrate diverse intellectual traditions.

1.2 Chinese Philosophy vs Korean Philosophy

Chinese culture and language have greatly influenced the Korean peninsula continuously for thousands of years. In pre-modern times, intellectuals even adopted 한문 (漢文), classical written Chinese, to express their own thoughts—even though they spoke Korean in their daily life. Korean Philosophy is closely related to Chinese Philosophy; since 삼국시대 (三國時代), Korea imported both 한자 (漢字) and ideologies/texts from China. Then, they innovated on them to create their own. Although 한자 was modified several different times to try adapt it to Korean, the biggest turning point was the creation of the Korean alphabet system, 한글 (訓民正音) in 1443. This invention

allowed Koreans to record the ideas they developed as members of the East Asian cultural sphere in their own language. This led to Korean authors to be able to express their own thoughts and feelings more vividly, and allowed Koreans to more efficiently process and adapt foreign concepts to their own culture.

1.3 Innovation

Korean identity is a result of long-standing self-awareness and tenacious practice of reconstructing outside cultures to adapt them to their cultural context. It is a result of continuous innovation. Innovation can be adaptive or disruptive. Adaptive innovation is subtle, arising from the desire to adopt an element from a foreign culture and assimilate it to your own. It is a process that modifies the original element to make it fit the adopting culture better; if there were no innovation in this process, it would simply be borrowing or even appropriating. An example of this type of innovation is the acceptance of Buddhism from India into China and its development into 禪 Buddhism (선불교). Disruptive innovation, on the other hand, occurs when adaptive innovation reaches a critical point in which that part of a foreign culture is taken and internalized. This type of innovation can lead to fundamental changes in the existing culture of a society when the foreign element takes a new meaning. An example of this type of innovation is 한글, which disrupted the status quo on how the Korean language was to be employed. At first, 한글 was rejected by the intellectuals of the time, who considered 한문 to be superior to 한글. In spite of this, 한글 survived for more than 500 years and eventually became the main way in which Koreans communicate their thoughts and arguments.

1.4 Confucianism and Korean Culture

Confucianism originates in Ancient China at around 500 BCE, from a thinker named 孔子 (공자). He was born at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋) when the 周 Dynasty had collapsed leading to widespread chaos, the Warring States Period (戰國). This chaos led to many thinkers proposing their ways of thought to try spread peace around the world. Each thinker, such as 老子 (노자), 孟子 (맹자), and 孔子 himself, proposed their ideas to the state rules. Confucianism was adopted by the 漢 Dynasty as their main ideology, and from then, the Confucian Classics spread all over the East Asian cultural sphere. Confucianism went on to arrive in Korea during the 삼국시대. At this point, Daoism and Buddhism had been the predominating ideologies; from the 고려 Dynasty (高麗), Confucianism adopted a large role in the educational system, institutional structures, and social attitudes. In 조선 Korea (朝鮮) between the 14th and 19th centuries, Confucianism had a resurgence in the form of Neo-Confucianism. This ideology was adopted and reinterpreted by Korean thinkers, leading to several debates that have shaped Korean philosophy as a whole.

1.5 한글

Even before 한글, the Korean language had some unique Chinese character-based writing systems, such as 향찰 (鄉札), 구결 (口訣), and 이두 (吏讀). These systems borrowed Chinese characters to represent Korean pronunciations; however, this was insufficient to cover the entire phonological profile of the Korean language. This problem was solved by creating a new alphabet, in an example of a disruptive innovation of Korean culture. This fundamentally changed the value system of Korea by democratising information and creating new methods of communication. The creation of 한글

is a result of mixture of cultural boundaries: it contains the principles of the East Asian Trinity (삼재/三才), the dynamics of Yin and Yang (음양/陰陽) and the Five Elements (오행/五行).

1.5.1 삼재

삼재 is comprised of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. This is a worldview that understands Humanity as an active agent mediating between Heaven and Earth. Chinese philosophy emphasises in the unity between Heaven and Humanity (天人合一) whereas Korean people have appreciated this relationship without neglecting the role of the Earth. In Korea, this trinity was maintained as a dynamic structure: Humanity depends on the Earth, we look up to Heaven, and we live between the two.

The basic vowel sounds in 한글 represent each of these: Heaven is •, Earth is —, and humanity is |. These three get combined to create vowels like ㅏ and ㅑ, representing the universe's balance.

1.5.2 음양

음양 is a dualistic concept that describes how opposite forces may be complimentary, interconnected, and interdependent, and give rise to each other in the natural world. In Chinese cosmology, the universe creates itself out of a primary chaotic energy, organised into the infinite cycle of 음양. 음 represents the receptive and 양 the active, and these two are seen in all forms of duality and change towards each other. The three basic forms from 삼재 are modified with extra strokes to create vowels, either inward or outward. For example, eu (ㅡ) is modified with a downward stroke to become u (ㅜ). This is 음. The opposite type of vowel formation is 양. 음 and 양 actually have a different weight: 음 vowels sound dark and heavy, whereas 양 vowels sound light or shallow.

1.5.3 오행

오행 is a fivefold conceptual scheme that traditional Chinese thought uses to explain a wide array of phenomena, from traditional medicine to cosmic cycles and even the succession of political regimes.

It is comprised of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water in the order of mutual generation sequence. In the order of mutual overcoming, they can also be arranged as wood, earth, water, fire, and metal.

In the creation of 한글, these five elements were used to signify five different positions of the tongue within the mouth when creating a consonant sound.

Originally, there had been resistance to the usage of 한글 by intellectuals who opposed the democratization of education and change of the status quo; however, due to its ease of teaching and integration of the three main philosophical concepts explained before, 한글 went on to be accepted by the masses. This writing system would go on to play a big part in the awareness of Korean identity.

2 Core Debates of Korean Philosophy

In Western thought, reason and emotion are often considered two separate and incompatible concepts. This has been the case since ancient times: in his chariot allegory of the soul, Plato described reason, spirit, and appetite as separate entities. Reason was a charioteer directing the chariot, who

commanded emotions. Emotions, then, were horses to be controlled from going different ways and that needed to be guided towards enlightenment.

In Western modern philosophy, Descartes famously emphasized the use of reason and gave it superiority—he was even the founder of a whole movement named rationalism! The idea behind cogito, ergo sum was that reason alone determined knowledge and this could be done in a way separate to feelings.

In contrast to Descartes, David Hume argued that all human knowledge comes solely from experiences and that passions are the ones governing human behavior, not reason. He said that reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of passions.

In the point of view of Koreans, an emotional character and a reasoning character are inseparably related. Emotion triggers reason and reason explains emotion. If balanced well, they can become partners greater than they are on their own. Koreans look at reason and emotion in an integrated way, as opposed to the classical Western thought. This perception is why in Korean, the term 마음 refers to mind, heart, feeling, emotion, or even interest, a term that expressed the combined faculties of emotion and reasoning in Korean philosophy.

One of the key features of Korean philosophy was its vigorous interest in understanding and explaining the human experience in the day to day life. Emotion itself was one of the most important topics of discussion for Korean philosophers, whereas Chinese philosophy tended to focus on human nature instead of mundane emotions.

Once Neo-Confucianism entered Korea, big debates such as 사칠논쟁 (四七論爭) emerged, which discussed the relationship between everyday feelings and moral emotions. This led to deep discussions about morality. 사칠논쟁 in particular lasted for an unprecedented length of time and was one of the most influential philosophical debates in the Peninsula. This reveals that both traditional and contemporary Korean philosophy persistently aim to find truth in everyday experiences.

2.1 사칠논쟁

The 사 in the name of the debate refers to the four sprouts, 사단 (四端). These are the moral emotions originally described by 맹자 as the innate moral inclinations of humans. They are compassion (仁), shame & dislike (義, the sprout for righteousness), deference & compliance (禮), and approval & disapproval (智). It was believed that the activation of these moral sprouts would lead to the actualization of our innate morality.

The 칠 in turn, refers to the ordinary emotions, 칠정 (七情). 칠정 are considered neutral emotions and were classified as joy (喜), anger (怒), sorrow (哀), fear (懼), love (愛), hate (惡), and desire (欲).

사칠논쟁, which started in the 조선 era, made scholars question whether everyday feelings could be transformed into moral emotions, thus questioning the innate nature of those moral emotions. Are pure and ideal moral emotions innate, unlike the whims of everyday feelings? The debate questioned if 사단 are truly distinct from 칠정 and whether individuals can cultivate their 칠정 to ultimately align with moral values. In a way, the debate was an exploration of whether human morality is born-with or acquired. It suggested that in order to understand human nature, one must reconcile both emotion and reason, because the debate paved the way for the philosophical pursuit of morals in harmony of everyday emotions.

2.1.1 리 and 기

In the 11th century, Buddhism and Daoism exerted a considerable influence on the way scholars interpreted Confucianism. During the Confucian restoration process, scholars harshly criticized Daoism and Buddhism. Ironically though, they ended up formulating a type of Confucianism that incorporated concepts from both of these other ideologies: Neo-Confucianism.

Neo-Confucianism was popularized by the 元 Dynasty when they destroyed 南宋 and brought scholars back to Beijing. It was introduced to Korea in the late 고려 dynasty, where scholars enthusiastically embraced it and pushed Buddhism out as the official state ideology of Korea. Slowly, Koreans started to innovate on Neo-Confucianism, inciting debates on concepts not seen in other regions.

Neo-Confucianism is based on two core concepts, 리 (理) and 기 (氣). 리 is the universal, eternal principle or pattern governing the cosmos, while 기 is the dynamic material force/energy that constitutes the physical world, with everything in it being a manifestation of both. 리 provides the order and ideal, 기 provides the substance. Self-cultivation aims to purify one's 기 to better align with one's inherent 리. Neo-Confucian scholars believed all beings in the universe share one original nature comprising all the principles in the world; the differences between individuals and types of being came down to the quantities and qualities of 기 within each individual.

In 사칠논쟁, the view of philosopher 퇴계 (退溪) was that 사단, should be distinguished from the everyday 칠정. People call 퇴계's view seven opposes four. 퇴계 believed that the emergence of our innate morals, our 사단, are made of 리, while 칠정 are made of 기. Thus, even though both are types of emotions, 사단 are inherently good through their 리, while 칠정 are a mixture of good and bad due to the tabulation of 기.

On the other hand, philosopher 율곡 (栗谷), thought that 사단 are the ideal expression of emotions, but they are directly connected to 칠정. People call 율곡's view seven embraces four. 율곡 believed that principles are a result of a union of the embodiment (기) and guide (리), so it is impossible to obtain a pure expression of one without the other. He proposed that 사단 should be understood to be rooted in 칠정. Thus, the debate goes: are the four part of the seven or the four dependent on 리 and the seven on 기?

2.2 호락논쟁

After the contributions made by 퇴계 and 율곡, Korean philosophy obtained its own references and sources. This rich body of indigenous scholarship allowed later thinkers to engage actively with Korean sources rather than relying exclusively on Chinese precedents. This led to the rise of internal debates within the 조선 tradition itself. One of the most prominent of these debates was 호락논쟁 (湖洛論爭), that involved two prominent factions: the orthodox 호 (湖) faction and the reformative 락 (洛) faction. These two sides both were factions of the 율곡 school who claimed to preserve and correctly interpret 율곡's philosophy. They, however, differed on a variety of interlinked theoretical issues. One of the most prominent of these issues was on 인물성동이 (人物性同異): whether the nature (성/心) of human beings and that of nonhuman beings (especially animals) is inherently the same or different. The 락 line argued for sameness, following the reasoning that the 리 is the same, 기 is different; the 호 line argued for difference, emphasizing that humans alone fully realize the moral endowment of 인의예지 (仁義禮智). Both sides agreed that all beings are structured by 리 and 기, and both conceded that animals display limited moral tendencies, but they diverged on the

purity, scope, and degree of moral capacity.

Another series of debates that were connected to the debates on 인물성동이 were debates about the pre-arousal state of the heart-mind (심/心)—a state known as 미발 (未發)—and whether its equilibrium is originally good, or whether good and evil are already implicated there. 호 scholars tended to stress qualitative difference and the need to rectify and refine 기 to manifest 리; 락 scholars, highlighting universality, stressed that sages and commoners share the same 심 in kind (differences are in cultivation). These positions also map onto different emphases in learning method (공부/工夫): the 호 line gives priority to purifying temperamental endowments of 기, while the 락 line foregrounds the universal accessibility of 리 through study and practice.

2.3 우리 —Uri

The Korean term 우리 is commonly translated as “we,” but its use extends far beyond the English plural pronoun. It functions as a culturally embedded expression of the integrated self, emphasizing relational identity rather than an isolated individual. In everyday speech, Koreans frequently prefer 우리 over 나 (“I/me”) when expressing ownership or affiliation, highlighting a worldview in which the individual is understood through their connections to others.

This linguistic pattern reflects a cultural inclination toward interdependence, community, and shared belonging. It stresses that one’ s identity is co-constituted with the identities of those around them. As a result, Koreans routinely say expressions such as “우리엄마” (“our mother”) or “우리집” (“our home”), even when referring to matters that, in many Western contexts, would be understood as strictly personal. This usage does not diminish individuality; rather, it situates individuals within a network of meaningful relationships.

Using uri thus signals a sense of belonging to a greater whole, rooted in shared values, family ties, social groups, and cultural identity. The self is not dissolved into the collective but is understood as relationally situated. This aligns with broader Korean concepts of the “connected self,” which emphasizes one’ s role within a community, and the “integrated self,” which views the web of human relationships as a unified entity.

The Korean language further reflects this relational orientation through its three demonstratives: 이, 그, and 저. These indicate proximity not only in physical space but also—subtly—in relational space. 이 refers to what is close to the speaker, 그 to what is close to the listener, and 저 to what is distant from both. In cultural context, this system reinforces sensitivity to interpersonal positioning: using 그 can acknowledge the listener’ s psychological or social closeness, reflecting the speaker’ s awareness of the relational field surrounding the uri-self.

In this framework, the connected self relates to one’ s membership within society, while the integrated self highlights the inseparability of individuals from the collective. Both perspectives underscore a key theme in Korean thought: individuality is not sacrificed for the group, but rather understood through the dynamic relationships that constitute the community. The concept of 우리 illustrates how language itself shapes and expresses this culturally distinctive view of personhood.

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	禪佛敎	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 —	gongbu uri	Effort, cultivation, practical moral work “We”; relational self emphasizing collective identity
